

Literature Review:
“Social Life and Public Spaces of Video Games”

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Social Life and Public Spaces of Video Games

Introduction

As a society, we like to be social in our free time. Our cities are designed to meet that expectation. We can not imagine a city without its public spaces. But in our current world, people found another place to socialize, virtual spaces. In these new public areas, people can talk with someone who's in a different country within seconds. We also see this new approach in video games with multiplayer games and their social environments. It can also be discussed that these spaces are becoming an alternative to physical public places.

This review is to discuss whether a public space inside a video game virtual space is possible or not. And also to understand why the players choose these types of socializing and public places instead of physical ones by discussing various articles about the topic. To achieve that, I will first discuss the articles about the public spaces in our physical cities and then with the information gathered from these articles will discuss the articles that studied social life in virtual spaces to find out the similarities and differences between the different types of socializing areas for people. This review wasn't able to discuss much about the player types and how it affects the public spaces in video games due to lack of information.

Public Spaces in Cities

What is a public space? Tonnelat, accepting the importance of public spaces in cities starts his article "*The Sociology of Urban Public Space*" with this question. He proceeds with "*In Urban Planning, public space has historically been described as 'open space' ... as opposed to the private domain of housing of work*" (Tonnelat, 2010) But this description is the textbook description of public space, which accepts the public spaces as third spaces. Third spaces are the spaces that are different from the first space, which is our home, and the second space which is our workspace. But in today's society, public space needs to be understood as a space accessible to the public. (Tonnelat, 2010) With this understanding, we need to discuss public spaces with their accessibility instead of their design or where they are located.

Accessibility to third places in the cities varies and the usage of these places changes depending on this. Because of this, to fully understand the nature of public places we need to observe different versions of public spaces. Tonnelat takes them in five different forms; Streets, Commercial Centres, Train Stations, Café, Square, and Urban Parks. All these places are designed to become public spaces,

to be where people meet up except the streets. Streets are usually a passing point for most people. Tonnelat mentions that the street has been always a constant object of attention after the failure of post-war construction. (Tonnelat, 2010) Jane Jacobs has the same worries in her book *"The Death and Life of Great American Cities"* and offers 'return to the street', she thinks streets are an important part of urban life so they need to be revived and used as public spaces again. (Jacobs, 1993) At the same time, we see that Kevin Lynch was researching how the built form of the city affects people's representations of the environment. And found five distinct elements he calls 'the image of the city' (paths, districts, nodes, edges, and landmarks) (*Figur 1*) (Lynch, 1977) Both Jacob's and Lynch's studies show us the same logic Tonnelat mentioned in their article, which is *"Public space was the principal element from which people derive their representations of a city"* (Tonnelat, 2010)



Figur 1(Image of the City by Lucas Lindsey)

In conclusion, public spaces are dependent on people and how they review those areas, not only on the design itself. They became public spaces because people assign the role to those areas. The only thing we can do while designing is to support the community's needs. Public spaces become public spaces because the design is appropriate for people to gather, but also people choose to gather there and created a culture for the space. We can also argue that this applies to virtual spaces, and they create their own culture in their public place.

Social Life and Public Spaces in Virtual Space

Virtual worlds are getting more and more popular, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs or MMORPGs) have massive popularity as complete worlds and they are actively inhabited. (Oliver, Polygon Destinies: The Production of Place in Digital Role-Playing Game , 2001) Just like the physical cities, they have a design of multiple cities and areas with a community playing in them every day. Same as Ducheneaut et al. say *"What makes MMOs distinctive is the way they make people interact with each other. People interact with each other with the help of avatars and talk with voice or text. They also place their avatars face-to-face as well."* (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, Coordinating Joint Activity in Avatar-mediated Interaction, 2007) Players tend to create their social groups in these games. The conversations in these games are mostly text-based and mute. Text-based channels are integral to the functioning of these MMORPG worlds. These channels also provide the means for the world to grow as a cultural site, inside of the game. (Oliver, The Similar Eye: Proxy Life and Public Space in the MMORPG, 2002) These cultures usually break the skin of their own and

step into the real world with forums that are created or voice channels they use on other platforms. (Oliver, *The Similar Eye: Proxy Life and Public Space in the MMORPG*, 2002) Oliver's article also supports that the MMO worlds are dependent on the character's development and unless you grow your character in that world you don't get to experience the world fully. He also mentions that these worlds include pre-eminent danger and the players usually choose to form groups to overcome these dangers and learn together. (Oliver, *The Similar Eye: Proxy Life and Public Space in the MMORPG*, 2002) These groups work similarly to society's community and work together as a team to create a



culture together that affects the communication they have to achieve better things. (Figur 2) MMORPGs usually encourage, and sometimes force players to play together and create a culture together that only the players inside the world can understand.

Figur 2(MMORPG Lost Ark Chat)

Now that we have established that virtual worlds have their own culture with the players and the users, we can discuss if it is possible to create a virtual public space that works similarly to physical public spaces and what we can do to amplify the effect on virtual world public spaces and make people hang out in these areas just as they are in physical public places. Criticism says that producing a space in cyberspace is not possible because it doesn't support the range of human expressions. But we can see that MMORPGs produce both public and the place. (Oliver, *The Similar Eye: Proxy Life and Public Space in the MMORPG*, 2002) They can both produce a group of people who share a culture and turn the space into a place because this group gives it meaning. When a culture is created a place can be created as well. MMOs care about the number of players a lot because the crowd shows us the success of that game but crowds are also important for communities to create the culture needed to transform the space into a place. But just as in real physical life, some of these video game spaces work as public places and become a place where a lot of players gather around but at the same time, some of them become dead places. Ducheneaut, Gathman Nickell, and Moore believe this is because of two reasons; first is due to poor game design and second is overall server population is low. But even when the overall server population is low, there are always certain locations with high concentrations of players. The players usually dwell on those areas. (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, *From 3D Space to Third Place: The Social Life of Small Virtual Space*, 2009) They think the main reason for this is accessibility, just like what Tonnelat believes for physical public spaces, they believe the key to creating virtual public spaces is accessibility. People tend to dwell around areas that are close to their jobs, houses, etc. Just like in MMOs players dwell around their daily mission areas. But different from physical life places, they also think that in virtual worlds players

need some interactive elements to dwell. (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, From 3D Space to Third Place: The Social Life of Small Virtual Space, 2009) In physical places, people can find activities to do easily, but in virtual places, they are bound to do the things that are coded in the game. When players are given a space, the only thing they can do is chat and make their characters do some automated movements. This sometimes works and creates places, but when players have interactive elements, the process of space becoming a place and becoming a dwelling point for players is faster. (Figures 3 and 4)Ducheneaut et al. also found out that the placement of these areas is important too. Creating a dwelling point somewhere players won't go otherwise tends to drop the success rate of that place, and that kind of area always needs constant activities and invitations compared to the places that are in the middle of the cities where daily quests are located, etc. (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, From 3D Space to Third Place: The Social Life of Small Virtual Space, 2009) They also found out in the same research that just like in physical public places, players like to see regulars and enjoy seeing and talking with the people they already know. Smaller places, just like physical places, where they can jump into multiple conversations tend to become more successful than massively designed places. (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, From 3D Space to Third Place: The Social Life of Small Virtual Space, 2009)



Figur 3and 4 (MMORPG Lost Ark. City: Punika, Dancing Area)



Figur 5(MMORPG Lost Ark Chat)

It is obvious that the public spaces in virtual worlds are different from the physical ones, the biggest difference they have is the communication method. When in physical places we see the person who talks, see their body language and wait for our turn to talk, in virtual worlds we see the person's avatar, how they want to show themselves as in the game, which is most of the time by role-playing, and the players can only read the conversations in the game. (Figur 5) The question of whether the difference is beneficial or not, as well as whether it is an effective communication method, can be

debated. While some aspects of virtual environments may not be as good as physical places, there are certainly advantages to virtual environments. For example, it is easier to have multi-party conversations in virtual environments because there is less background noise and distractions. Additionally, activities like dancing are easier to do in virtual environments because people do not have to worry about coordinating their movements with others. Finally, virtual environments make it easier for people to communicate because they can talk at the same time without having to wait for their turns. (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, From 3D Space to Third Place: The Social Life of Small Virtual Space, 2009)

Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, and Moore in their other study *"Doing Virtually Nothing: Awareness and Accountability in Massively Multiplayer Online Worlds"* say *"In general, entirely private player activities should be avoided. Players can better coordinate their actions when they can see what the other is doing."* (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, *Doing Virtually Nothing: Awareness and Accountability in Massively Multiplayer Online Worlds.*, 2007) The experiments with players show that virtual environments tend to foster cooperation among players. However, they also found out in the same study that this can cause the opposite effect and lead to players feeling self-conscious about constantly checking the map or other in-game elements. (Ducheneaut, Gathman, Nickell, & Moore, *Doing Virtually Nothing: Awareness and Accountability in Massively Multiplayer Online Worlds.*, 2007) I'm unable to confirm the player identity percentage as I couldn't find any research on it. However, it is possible that the tendency of player identity in these games is skewed toward introverted individuals. Because of this adding more information that can make players self-conscious can cause the opposite effect. Ang et al.'s study supports Ducheneaut et al.'s second finding; *"In MMOs, there's usually instrumental play, instead of social play. And sometimes when they try to force*

the sociability of the game, players ran away instead of getting the desired effect.” (Ang, Christou, Law, & Zaphiris, 2011)

There are multiple reasons why introverts dislike physical public spaces, but the main two reasons are they need more personal space and they can be self-conscious around people they are not familiar with. They are also quieter than other people and like to have a small circle rather than a big one. (Bainbridge, 2021) Because of these, an alternative social environment such as virtual places is a good fit for them. When we force them to show everything as we do in physical places, it might have the exact opposite effect and push a lot of people from these public places as mentioned before in *”Designing for the User Experience of Sociability in Massively Multiplayer Online Games”* While there is not enough research on the player’s view on these public spaces, I don’t believe making them as realistic as possible is the way to answer the need of socializing in virtual worlds. As Juul says *”The level of abstraction determines how we can reason about the world as players.”* (Juul, 2014) The abstraction of life is at the root of designing a game. Abstracting the social interactions we have in life to make it more convenient for the players is important. The level of abstraction, in this case with the communication with other players, might seem like a limitation but it is a central component of the design of the video game worlds. (Juul, 2014)

The abstraction level of communication in MMORPG games might be the reason why players like to dwell in these certain areas in the game. When we look at these dwelling areas in the understanding of Vella’s hestial and hermetic Dwelling understanding; where hestial dwelling is representing home and hermetic dwelling is representing dynamic and open dwelling, we can easily say that the MMORPG games do not give us much of a hestial dwelling. (Vella, 2019) Even when players have hideouts or other forms of ‘personal’ spaces, they are not used primarily as their place to hang out. As Ducheneaut et al. mentioned before some areas in video game cities are frequently crowded, as players return to these areas to socialize with their community after completing their daily tasks. In turn, we can observe that those public spaces in video games turn into the hestial dwelling of the player. This shows us that where we have our homes as hestial dwellings in the physical world, in the silence of video game communication, the public spaces can be the place where people rest.

Conclusion

Virtual public spaces in video games are vastly different from physical public spaces in our cities in terms of usage, opportunities, and communication limitations. These differences create a unique and alternative environment for different types of people to socialize. While there is a lack of research on the users of these virtual public spaces and their expectations, it is clear that they differ from those who frequently use physical public spaces To fully develop the potential of virtual public spaces as a

social environment, further research is needed on player expectations and comparisons between virtual and physical spaces. Instead of trying to replicate physical spaces in a virtual environment, developers should take advantage of the unique possibilities that virtual spaces offer and cater to different demographics without affecting others.

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