

Identity-as-Place: Trans-Ludic Identities in Mediated Play Communities— The Case of the Uru Diaspora

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Abstract

This paper presents results from an ethnographic study of players from the massively multiplayer game (MMOG) *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*. *Uru* opened as a beta test in 2003 and closed less than six months later, leaving about 10,000 players self-termed “refugees.” Many of these players immigrated to other online worlds, carrying their *Uru* identities with them and forming collective “fictive ethnicities” within games and virtual environments such as *Second Life* and *There.com*, the primary subject of the study. These players described themselves in terms of a collective identity, referring to *Uru* as “our homeland” and to themselves as “refugees.” They also created artifacts and environments in these virtual worlds either directly derived from or inspired by *Uru*, thus using place as a means to express their collective identity. Throughout these worlds, they became known as “the Uru people,” or simply, “Uruvians.” Players who migrated into *There.com* were initially discriminated against; however, over time, due to their group size (450 at its peak), as well as their demographics (50% female and largely Baby Boomers with disposable time and income), they began to assert significant influence on the *There.com* culture at-large. Because of the shared experience of *Uru*’s closure, characterized by players as being highly traumatic, they also had a strong commitment to community and became actively engaged in community-building activities in their new homes. Through a dynamic process of iterative social feedback and “transculturation” (Ortiz 1947), they eventually transformed from “Uruvians” to hybrid “Uru-Thereians,” integrating both virtual places into their collective identity.

This paper explores the connection of identity to virtual place, referencing in particular anthropology, humanist and socio-geography and Internet studies to look at the construction and performance of “fictive ethnicity” tied to a specific, though virtual and fictional, locality. I will argue that in the current historical moment, in which connections between identity, community and place are being supplanted by the generic placenessness and identitylessness of “global markets,” the tendency of players in the Uru Diaspora to construct a shared, place-based identity may reflect a larger need by individuals to associate themselves with affinity groups and reclaim a sense of connection between place, community and identity.

¹ Artemesia is the author’s “research avatar.”

Prologue: An Imaginary Homeland

My Homeland Uru

*From my beautiful homeland
From my beloved homeland
I hear the Bahro cry
and Kadish's wife sing her song of despair*

*And a refrain is sung by a sister who lives far from her homeland
And the memories make her cry
The song that she sings springs from her pain and her own tears
And we can hear her cry*

*Your homeland strikes your soul when you are gone
Your homeland sighs when you are not there
The memories live and flow through my blood
I carry her inside me, yes its true*

*The refrains continue, as does the melancholy
And the song that keeps repeating,
Flows in my blood, ever stronger
On its way to my heart*

*I sing of my homeland, beautiful and loved
I suffer the pain that is in her soul
Although I am far away, I can feel her
And one day I'll return*

I know it

The homeland to which the author of this poem is referring is an entirely fictional, entirely virtual place. The poem was written by Raena², a player from the massively multiplayer online game *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, about three months after the game closed in 2004. In the months and years that followed, hundreds, possibly thousands of *Uru* players immigrated into other online games and virtual worlds, many self-identifying as “Uru refugees” and referring to the game as their “homeland.” In this paper I will explore the notion of “identity-as-place” and the construction by players of what I term a “fictive ethnicity” rooted in a connection to a fictional, virtual locality.

² All individual player and group names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

***Uru* History & Context**

***Uru* and Its Players**

To lay the groundwork for understanding the dynamics of this relationship, it will be helpful to understand the nature and the history of *Uru* and its players. *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* was one of the final games in a successful game franchise that began with *Myst* in 1993. (Figure 1) *Myst* was the first blockbuster CD-ROM game, and continued to hold its chart-topping status until it was outstripped by *The Sims* in 2001. *Myst* was classified by many as the first videogame that was truly a work of art (Rothstein 1994; Carroll 1994). It broke new ground in digital interactive narrative, established a new genre, the adventure puzzle game, raised the bar for both visual and audio design, and broadened the audience of games to women and older adults (Miller 1997). The majority of *Uru* players were *Myst* fans that had already been “living” in the *Myst* world for a decade when the multiplayer game launched.



Figure 1: *Myst* drew players into a fully realized fictional world.³

This history is important for two reasons: One, it helps us to understand who these players were: The *Uru* demographic is unusual for an MMOG, both in terms of age and gender. The majority of players in the group that was the focus of this study were Baby Boomers and exactly half were women. This is a very unconventional demographic for an online game, most of which attract predominately of college-age and young males (Yee 2001, Castronova 2001, Seay et al 2004). Two, because *Uru* was part of a decade-old franchise, players already had an affinity with the fictional world in which the game took place before even setting foot within *Uru* itself. That there was an entire community of people with whom they could share what had previously been a solitary experience was something of a revelation to most players, who, in interviews, commonly identified themselves as “loners.” This background helps us in explaining how players could form such a strong affinity with a virtual place that they had only inhabited for less than six months.

³ All images by the author, except where otherwise noted.

The Myst World and the *Uru* Narrative

The Myst world is one of the most original and complex fully realized imaginary worlds in any medium. It is at once literate and visual, rich with allegory, both crafty and craftful in its expressive methods, which include obscuring information and leaving much up to the player's imagination and deductive reasoning. Narratives are not so much told as discovered. Characters are notably absent from the early games, yet their presence is palpable through the environments the player navigates. The aesthetics juxtapose exotic natural landscapes with complex oversized machinery and buildings with giant moving parts. The games are slow-moving, comprised of what have been described as Mensa-level puzzles (Carroll 1994), requiring extensive reading of written text that is notable for its complete lack of expository. The Miller Brothers' craft is epitomized by the classic authorial adage of "show, don't tell." The Myst world is arguably the best and most uniquely visionary example we have in digital media of what Tolkien called "subcreation," the invention of a totally imaginary, fully articulated world (Tolkien 1983).

The Myst world concerns a fictional, likely ancient, vaguely steampunk culture that draws from a number of traditional influences, including the old and new testaments, and the visual iconography and culture of Native Americans, to create a complex and extensible universe. Its cosmology revolves around a humanoid race, the D'ni, who possess the godlike ability to write entire worlds into being, but who are embattled by their own hubris. These worlds are represented by books, each of which contains an entire sub-world and its inhabitants. These books, called Ages, serve as the primary transportation device in the game, and within each of their resident worlds are complex puzzles that can take hours or even days to solve. In addition to this elegant conceit for the creation of an extensible world, some have posited that *Myst* also provides a compelling metaphor for game design and computer programming.

Like other successful imaginary worlds, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, the complexity of the Myst universe, story and game have inspired a thriving fan culture. *Myst* and *Uru* fans have created D'ni dictionaries, elaborately conceived and crafted game walkthroughs, a magazine, and all manner of fan fiction and art (Figure 2) in homage to their beloved fictional world. In spite of its success, the Myst world is one of the few videogame franchises that has never been extended to any media beyond written or recorded books. At various points, everything from a feature film, to a television series, to theme park on an actual physical island, were proposed, but none of these projects ever came to fruition.



Figure 2: Uru-inspired quilt by Budgie (Image: Budgie)

Uru, while not the last game in the series, formed a kind of bookend to *Myst* for a number of reasons. First, it was the first and only multiplayer game in the series. There was a single-player mode, but the puzzles were designed to be solved in groups. Second, *Uru* was real-time 3D. This means it was both navigable and inhabitable in a way that most (though not all) of the earlier games, which were essentially nonlinear slideshows, were not. Third, *Uru* was the first and only game in the series to feature a player avatar. (Figure 3) Prior games were played in first person with an undefined player role, referred to obliquely as “The Stranger.” My research showed that the ability to visualize oneself as a unique and personalized character in the *Myst* world introduced both an experience of proprioception, enhancing players’ sense of embodiment in the world, and also a sense of unique identity. This sense of identity was further enhanced by the presentation of this avatar to others. As MacKinnon has astutely put it, in cyberspace “I am perceived, therefore I am” (1995:119). I refer to this phenomenon as “seeing and being seen.” Players’ sense of presence was enhanced not only by seeing themselves, but also by being seen by others (Pearce 2006). The introduction of the avatar is the pivotal contributing factor to the emergence of the *Uru*’s diasporic cultures. Without a player avatar, there would be no affordance in the game for constructing either individual or group identity, and without this ability, players would not have been able to construct the “fictive ethnicity” that this paper describes.



Figure 3: The introduction of a player avatar in *Uru* enhanced players’ sense of presence.

Finally, there is the matter of the *Uru* narrative itself. The narrative of *Myst* centered on Atrus and Catherine and their errant sons Sirrus and Achenar. The central character of *Uru* is their younger sister Yeesha, who has learned and exceeded her father’s craft of Age-writing. The hub of the game is the abandoned city of D’ni Ae’gura (Figure 4), housed in an underground desert cavern, and settled by the D’ni *when their own world was destroyed*. In other worlds, the D’ni themselves were refugees. The word “Uru” is attributed to have two meanings in the D’ni language: one, “a large gathering or community;” the other, a more informal definition, “you are you.” Players gather in the “cavern” as “Explorers,” but the implication is that they play themselves. They arrive in D’in Ae’gura long after it has been deserted, guided by cryptic clues left by Yeesha.

The chief conflict in the game narrative was the restoration of the city. (Figure 4) Yeesha was pitted against the D'ni Restoration Council, a fictional group of humans, played by Cyan employees (known colloquially as "Cyanists"), who were the official caretakers of the cavern and had the authority restore Ages so they were "safe" for explorers. As each new Age was restored, it would be opened up for players, hence the game was envisioned as having an episodic structure in which new Ages would be released at regular intervals. However, Yeesha's messages suggested a darker side to the D'ni, whose pride was ultimately their downfall, and who appeared to have enslaved a group of "beast-people," called Bahro, who Yeesha calls "The Least." The City and some of the Ages were peppered with their markings, pictograms that told their story. The implication as that the Bahro were the "indigenous" peoples of the cavern, which had, in essence, been colonized by the D'ni. Thus a controversy was set in motion among players who sided with the DRC and wished to restore the D'ni culture, and players who sided with Yeesha and wished to free the Bahro. In practice, there were also players who preferred to remain outside this conflict, which created still a third factionless faction.



Figure 4: The city of D'ni Ae'Gura

Uru is unlike any other MMOG in that it has no points, no levels, no player statistics, no competition, and no killing. The mechanic is based on collaborative puzzle solving

similar to that of other *Myst* games. The gameplay is for the most part nonlinear and un-timed, promoting open-ended exploration. Ages can be solved in a single play-through or over a series of sessions. A few other features were added, including a scavenger hunt type activity where you have to find mysterious floating “markers” throughout various areas of the game.

The Tale of the Uru Diaspora

Becoming Refugees

Uru was released as a CD-ROM in the Fall of 2003, but the full game was never opened to the public. Instead, the game went into a beta test, known as “Prologue,” to which players had to request an invitation. Eventually, due in part to a “clerical error,” all the players who had requested an invitation received one, and at its peak, *Uru Prologue* hosted 10,000 players. The following February, with only a few days warning, publisher Ubisoft and developer Cyan announced that *Uru Prologue* would be closing and that the full public release, *Uru Live*, was being canceled. Players gathered in-world for the server shutdown is remembered by players as “Black Monday” or “Black Tuesday,” depending on which time zone players were in at the time of the closure. (Figure 5)



Figure 5: The final screen of *Uru Prologue*.

All of the players in my study described their reaction to this announcement and its aftermath as “post traumatic stress,” and most of them were surprised by the strength of their emotional response. As mentioned earlier, many identified in interviews as “loners,” prompting me to refer to them in publications as “a community of loners.” For most, *Uru* was their first exposure to an online game, and they found themselves surprised at how quickly and easily they bonded with their fellow explorers. In a relatively short period of time, players had formed a cohesive community, especially within the “hoods,” with The Gathering of Uru (TGU), the main focus of this study comprising the largest of these.

Migration

As soon as players heard about the closure, they began to make preparations. TGU leaders had created a forum, which included a live text chat area, to help players keep in contact with each other. Others began to scout for new games and virtual worlds as candidates for migration. They would report their findings to the forums, complete with screenshots and detailed descriptions of the world's features. (Figure 4) These comparative discussions are fascinating because they reveal a great deal about what software features players valued, and what points of contention might arise. There was no formal decision made to move to *There.com*. As with virtually every other aspect of *Uru* diasporic culture, the "decision" was made in an emergent, bottom-up fashion. While players scattered to a number of worlds, a feedback loop began in which the more players who signed up for *There.com*, the more players who followed. When Leesa and Lynn, the group's mayor and deputy mayor, adopted *There.com* as their new home, though they were explicitly told that everyone could settle where they wished, the majority chose to follow their leaders to the new settlement. In order to facilitate this migration pattern, players adopted (again emergently) a practice of "trans-ludic" identities: When they started their accounts in *There.com* and other virtual worlds, they maintained the same names and approximated the same appearances as their avatars from *Uru*. This is the common practice among all players who identify themselves as refugees or immigrants: they carry their online identities with them between worlds, thus facilitating continuity among group members in different virtual worlds.



Figure 6: Scouting for a new home in *There.com*. (Image by Raena)

Uruvians who migrated into *There.com* would often refer to themselves in the collective "we." In early interviews with members of the TGU, they would highlight the differences between themselves and other gamers, and speak about their shared values. (Figure 7) "We are explorers," they would say, or "we are puzzle solvers." They were also very clear that they did not like violent games, which was one of the reasons they chose not to go to some of the MMOGs that were considered, such as *Ryzom*. Part of what they sought in a new home was a place with pleasing scenery that they could explore together, one of their favorite group activities in *Uru*. They also wanted an environment that was easy to learn and use and support their main objective, which was being together.



Figure 7: Uru refugees in player-created ethnic garb.

Initially, the *Uru* refugees were ostracized by native Thereians for a number of reasons. First, the group size, which, when joined by not-TGU Uruvian refugees, swelled to around 450 at its peak, was perceived as a threat to the small and nascent Thereian culture. Second, Thereians feared that the incoming immigrations would try to take over *There.com* and make into *Uru*. In fact, Uruvians did try early on to recreate *Uru* in one area of the world, but due to the constraints of *There.com*'s building apparatus, they were unable to realize this plan except through emergent and incremental means.

Third, and perhaps most interesting, was the question of limited natural resources. In virtual worlds, as Castronova has pointed out, what we typically think of as "resources" are theoretically unlimited: an infinite number of digital copies can be made of anything, with no scarcity (Castronova 2001). However, virtual worlds do contain one very valuable and very limited "natural" resource for which players often compete: server processing. The great irony of massively multiplayer environments is that the more massively they are populated, the more the experience is degraded by the limits of server processing, creating lag, loss of fidelity, and in some instances, complete server breakdown. In *There.com*, high player traffic causes avatars to revert to low resolution "blockheads." In *Second Life*, if a "sim" (distinct geographic area) is overcrowded, participants will be expelled into another area of the world. In *Uru*, the lag problem was so severe that when the city was highly populated, it became almost impossible to move, often resulting in software crashes.

Within the cultures of virtual worlds, lag can be equated to a kind of "virtual weather." It is not at all uncommon for an in-world conversation to begin "It's very laggy tonight." Activities in which timing is important, such as parades, races and coordinated flight maneuvers (*There.com* has air vehicles), can be rendered difficult or impossible if the lag becomes excessive. Thus, the presence of a large group that insisted on traveling in packs generated enough lag to degrade the experience of their neighbors. The TGU group was forced to move no less than seven times because in each place they settled, they were driven away by neighboring communities who resented the excessive lag

they were causing. They were also “grieved” in a variety of ways, including the posting of obscene signs adjacent to their settlements. Despite their utopian discourses, the politics of difference still follows us into virtual worlds.

In contrast with Thereians’ reactions, There, Inc., then owners of *There.com* wanted to accommodate this large and lucrative community. They had actually been forewarned about their arrival and saw this as an opportunity to quickly absorb a large influx of paying subscribers, which were sorely needed by the struggling start-up. Eventually they identified a small island, far removed from other areas, where Uruvians could settle with minimal impact on neighboring communities. (Figure 8)



Figure 8: TGU's island settlement in There.com. The flag at right bears TGU's logo.

Transculturation

Although the initial acclimation to *There.com* culture was challenging, over time, *Uru* refugees underwent a process of “transculturation” (Ortiz 1947). This included embracing their new home and integrating its constituent identity with the group identity they had brought with them from *Uru*. They also began creating *Uru*-derived and *Uru*-inspired artifacts and environments, thus using the space of *There.com* itself as an expression and marker of group identity. They began to create *Uru* places in *There.com*, much the way a new immigrant group creates a Little Italy or a Chinatown in a new city. Many of their creations also become popular with the Thereian population at-large, so a sort of emergent cultural exchange occurred through the transaction of player-created artifacts. Today, you can see *Uru*- and *Myst*-inspired artifacts, buildings, and landscape elements throughout *There.com*, many of which have been placed by non-*Uru* players who are entirely unaware of their history of cultural significance. In addition to expanding their *Uru* community settlements, which contributed significant real estate fees, they also became involved in other aspects of *There.com* culture and governance. Members of the *Uru* community began to hold posts on the Member Advisory Board, a representative body nominated by players and appointed by the world's owners. Uruvian immigrants also launched and continue to manage The

University of There, a large campus that hosts free educational activities open to all Thereians. (Figure 9) At one point, when *There.com* was threatened with closure, rather than abandon ship as many players, *Uru* refugees stood their ground and helped assure that their new home remained open.



Figure 9: The University of There campus features Uru-influenced cone houses.

As this new hybrid Uru-Thereian culture began to emerge, their own reflection on this transculturation process was highly sophisticated, and players were able to integrate it into their discourses of refugee identity. Cola, a disabled player who later passed away due to a congenital illness, gave voice to this transition in a now-famous letter to her community as follows:

*The merging of the soul of the Uru refugee into the citizen of There is happening. It wasn't without its tantrums of not wanting to merge, not wanting to believe Uru was gone and the guilty feelings of actually enjoying something other than Uru. But time does tell and there will always be the memories of D'ni and having been together there. Perhaps we could have a dual citizenship; Uruvian and Thereian. I have **Myst** being in D'ni, my soul, heart and being were **Riven** from D'ni, I am an **Exile** from the place where I want to be yet **Uru** has been put to bed. But perhaps the ending has not yet been written.*

The closing language is typical of Uruvians, who exalt in wordplay and puns; here she has integrated the names of some of the *Myst* games into a sentence expressing her feelings about the transculturation process. Note the last line, which is quoted from *Uru*, and is often invoked as an expression of the continual longing that, even while embracing this new community, the group may still someday return to its “homeland.”

Self-Determination

In the meanwhile, other Uruvians continued to pursue this aim in various ways. One TGU member, Erik, had set to work building a copy of the *Uru* neighborhood (the gathering place for each of the “hoods”) in Adobe Atmosphere, a 3D authoring environment. (Figure 10) Players from other groups created *Uru* mods, including replicas of the game and entirely new Ages, using popular game engines such as *Doom*. Another group of player/hackers, communicating via forums and other forms of mediation, began to reverse-engineer the *Uru* servers. Initially a “black ops” hacking enterprise, they reached out to Cyan and eventually received the developer’s blessing and support to allow players to run their own *Uru* servers. Finally, Uruvians could return to their homeland once again.



Figure 10: Erik's Atmosphere hood.

The outcome was more complex than one might have anticipated. *Until Uru*, as the new infrastructure was called, had the empowering effect of providing members of the Uru Diaspora with a sense of self-determination, a symbolic gesture that was appreciated by all. And while many Uruvians did return to the player-run servers, some, still too traumatized by the closure, opted not to. Others felt that since they had already played all the Ages, there was little point in returning to an *Uru* frozen in time that provided no new content (although the hackers were working on that as well.) Furthermore, and unexpectedly, players who had migrated into other games, including another group of Uruvians who had immigrated into and built an *Uru* island in *Second Life*, did not abandon their new settlements. Rather, they added the new instantiation of their homeland to their repertoire. This is one way in which immigration in virtual worlds differs significantly from real-world immigration. Players can “live” in multiple worlds simultaneously. This is somewhat unusual: the conventional wisdom with MMOG and VW marketing is that players maintain only one account at a time. But with older players, who have more income and free time, as well as strong community ties, maintaining multiple game accounts allows for a more dynamic and flexible relationship to the virtual worlds they inhabit. Players also used a variety of multi-modal and extra-virtual communication strategies such as voice-over-IP (for worlds that had text chat only or for which voice was technically problematic), forums, and web sites. These practices suggest that the oft-lauded “magic circle” is more porous than might have been previously believed. Players seem to move with fluidity and frequency between

worlds and communication modes, and it is becoming less unusual for players in certain demographics to maintain multiple accounts in multiple games and virtual worlds concurrently.

Return to the Homeland

In the summer of 2006, a new “shard” (server) of *Until Uru* was announced. This shard, set up by Cyan with an unnamed company, was framed in the fiction of the story thus: The D’mala shard, as it was called, was a test to see how many explorers could be called back to the cavern. The mysterious “Blake” was introduced to players by members of the DRC as the potential “donor” to support the continuation of the “restoration” project. Neither he nor the company behind the test were identified. Nonetheless, with a few days, players had discovered both the company that owned the server and the identity of the mysterious “donor,” and posted the information on the *Uru* page in Wikipedia. By February of 2007, three years after its closure, *Uru* reopened, in its originally envisioned form, complete with episodic Age openings, as *Myst Online: Uru Live (MO:UL)*, under the auspices of Turner Broadcasting’s GameTap “classic” game portal.⁴

The obvious outcome of the re-launch of *Uru* in its fully realized form would have been that *Uru* refugees would abandon their new homes and return to their “homeland,” a result that was expected by the game’s developers. In fact, a still more complex synergy emerged. Now culturally acclimated to their new communities, where they were exercising significant social, economic and political influence, and having established and built their own extensive homesteads, players had placed too high an investment in their new settlements to abandon them. Instead, they opted to, as they had done with *Until Uru*, split their time between their new homes and their “homeland.” Players engaged in “world-hopping,” where they would engage in an activity in one world, then go over to the next in the same evening. Even more interesting, they began recruiting new *Uru* players from within these communities. Of their own accord, players in *There.com* placed promotional signage for the game in *Uru*- and *Myst*-themed areas, and even built an “*Uru* Visitors Center” providing instructions on how to get into the game. They also conducted guided tours of *Uru* for *There.com* residents. *Second Life* players actually partnered with GameTap and re-opened their *Uru* Island, which had closed a few months before for lack of funds. The new instantiation of *Uru* in *Second Life* included signage and links to a special site that offered a special GameTap promotion for aspiring *Uru* players *Second Life*. This novel extension of inter-game immigration, in which players actually pointed to games from inside other games and virtual worlds suggests a significant shift in play habits away from the traditional “one game at a time” mode of MMOG subscribership.

⁴ I was implicated in this project and asked by Turner’s Blake Lewin, who had originally conceived of GameTap, to assist in locating and drawing *Uru* refugees to the D’mala to make a business case to their parent company Time-Warner/AOL. I worked closely with players in *There.com* and *Second Life* to promote the test, and provided consulting services to Turner doing the ramp-up to the reopening of *Myst Online: Uru Live*, which shifted my work to a mode of Action Research. I was given the official title of *Uru* Ethnographer.

For a brief time, players had, literally and figuratively, the “best of both worlds.” They could at once inhabit their homeland, complete with the long hoped-for new content, and at the same time maintain their *Uru* settlements in other worlds such as *There.com*. The synergy between the two brought more new migration in both directions, precipitating a new “Second Wave” of *Uru* immigrants into *There.com*, as well as a new generation of Uruvians recruited from other worlds. Far from a utopia, the new *Uru* was fraught with politics and drama. Cyan chose to designate a group of explorer liaisons from among longtime players and loyal fans, not all of whom were felt to fairly represent the majority sentiment. This quasi-democratic process resulted in some inter-group friction that complicated the long hoped-for “return to homeland.”

As you can imagine, the *Uru* story does not end here. April 2007 saw yet a third closure (*Until Uru* had been shut down when *MO:UL* was launched), albeit with more forewarning and grace than the initial closer. Players were once again forced into a third wave of immigration, with first wave immigrants acting as migration emissaries to those newly traumatized by the loss of the game. Again, Uruvians in *There.com* as well as *Second Life* staged tours and events welcoming their refugee brethren. But as always, “the ending has not yet been written.” Turner subsequently agreed to release the game’s rights back to Cyan, which is in the process of building up a new version of *Uru*, dubbed *Myst Online: Restoration Experiment* (*MO:RE*) that will turn over much of the game’s content creation to players. This decision has been a long time coming and is perhaps inevitable, although it remains to be seen how effectively the self-determination and creative freedom afforded in worlds like *There.com* and *Second Life* will merge with a developer-controlled environment such as *MO:RE*.

The *Uru* story suggests that, in graphical virtual worlds, place and identity can be tightly knit together. In the case of the *Uru* Diaspora, this plays out in two ways: Where players are “from” becomes a key marker of identity. In addition, in worlds like *Second Life* and *There.com*, spaces that players create through “productive play” practices also become an expression and marker of both individual and group identity (Pearce and Artemesia 2006). In a sense, the place itself becomes an “avatar,” a spatial embodiment of players’ individual and collective identities. (Figure 11)



Figure 11: The *Uru* “hood” fountain, an important cultural artifact as instantiated in (clockwise from upper left): *Uru*, *There.com*, *Atmosphere*, and *Second Life*.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This research can be characterized as “multi-sited cyberethnography,” combining methods from Marcus, Mason and Hine. Hine builds on Mason’s notion of “virtual ethnography” in describing an immersive approach to engaging with the lived experience of online cultures on their own terms. Marcus suggests “multi-sited ethnography” as a way to address the waning instances of hermetically-sealed real-life cultures, and proposes a method of “following” various aspects of culture from one field site to another (1995). There has been a tendency across MMOG and MMOW research to look at virtual worlds as singular and somehow separated, in the same way that anthropologists once viewed “primitive” or “native” culture. We are increasingly recognizing, however, that especially on PCs which are shared with other activities, the “magic circle” that bounds a game become increasingly porous. As players adopt trans-ludic identities, Taylor’s concept of “multiple bodies” (1999) can also be understood as multiple instantiations of the *same* virtual body, and these “identity-spaces” can be seen as a kind of “collective” body with a shared intersubjective meaning to the groups that create them.

This research was conducted as an eighteen-month ethnographic study across multiple field sites that took place from April of 2004 to September of 2006, as well as ongoing follow-up research conducted subsequently. The main portion of the study was conducted as part of a Ph.D. thesis for the SMARTLab Centre, then located at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design London. The project was framed as experimental design ethnography with a performative bent. The research question focused on the specific ways in which software design in online games influences social patterns in the construction of emergent cultures.

The theoretical framework combined several different perspectives.⁵ Aspects of feminist ethnography came into play, including: exploring the relationship between ethnographic accounts and fictional or literary approaches to writing (especially relevant in a “real” study of a “fictional” world); foregrounding gender (particularly important because of the strong male dominance in most online games); privileging the authority of the subjects and interrogating the subjectivity and authority of the researcher (Visweswaran 1994).

I was also very influenced performance and ritual ethnography (Turner 1982, Schechner 1988,) and notions of the performance of everyday life (Goffman 1959, Denzin 2003), with the twist of exploring ethnographic research itself as both a performance practice and a game. Clifford highlights this performative aspect in his writings on ethnographic allegory (1986) and Janesick describes a choreographic approach to participant-observation in which a repertoire of techniques is used in an improvisational fashion

⁵ I am greatly indebted to Tom Boellstorff for guiding me through this process. For those interested in game ethnography, I highly recommend his writings on virtual worlds and research methods, among the most rigorous on the subject to-date. (Boellstorff 2006 & 2008)

(2000). An improvisational approach is key to studying culture, which requires, as Strathern puts it “collect[ing] information on unpredictable outcomes” (2004:5). Because play is inherently labile and improvisational, its study requires a flexible, responsive approach.

To facilitate the fieldwork, I created Artemesia, a “research avatar,” a trans-ludic character that I used and continue to use to conduct my ethnographic research. I have co-credited this character with writings on the research, and frequently given presentations or co-presentations with her “in world.” (Figure 10)



Figure 10: Artemesia's avatars in (left to right): Guild Wars, There.com, Second Life, Uru, and Real Life.

Fieldwork

The primary subject was a group that varied in size from 300 to 450 players that migrated from *Uru* into *There.com*, and a secondary group of 200 that migrated into *Second Life*. The research method combined participant observation and visual anthropology. I also combined the seemingly contradictory methods of Paccagnella's participant-observation (1997) and Jones' virtual archaeology (1997) to integrate immersive methods with the analysis of artifacts, such as chatlogs, forums and player-created objects. When the project first began, there were few writings specifically about research methods for online games, but I did draw from Taylor's work on the subject (1999).

I also found that due to direct feedback, even pressure, from players, my research methods moved from “participant observation” to what I characterize as a “participant engagement.” This required a shift to an approach where I was more fully engaged in cultural practices rather than just observing them. We see some instances of this in traditional ethnography, such as Powdermaker's account of being drawn into a ritual dance with her native subjects (1966). I spent eighteen months immersed, in essence, “living” and playing with TGU members across a number of media, engaging with their culture and play practices, conducting formal and informal individual and group interviews in-world, reading forums, corresponding with players, and studying their user-created content. Over time, the group adopted me as a member, and I developed the role of “insider/outsider” in which I was once a part of the group and acknowledged as its ethnographer, folklorist, and cultural advocate. Towards the end of the project, I was very touched to receive a community award from players for “presenting their story to the world.”

Data Collection & Analysis

The data collection included chatlogs, field notes (including transcriptions of voice-based conversations and interviews), and screenshots of player activities and artifacts, as well as “extra-virtual” communication such as forums and e-mail. Data collection was particularly complex due to the multi-modal communication practices of players. For instance, *There.com* included both voice and text, and play in text-based *Until Uru* was often augmented by voice-over-IP software such as Skype or Teamspeak. Thus conversations could take place across text and voice, which could become very difficult to manage. Real-time transcription on a second computer was required for much of this data collection. Supplemental interviews and artifact documentation (screenshots) was conducted in *Second Life*. I also kept a journal, after Mills (1959), Janesick (1999), and others.

Filed notes, transcripts, chatlog and other textual data was entered into a Filemaker Pro database and coded by date, location (both world and specific location within the world), type of activity, participants, keywords etc. Visual data was stamped by date and analyzed alongside textual data. Mixed interpretive methods were used, drawing from Clifford and Marcus (1986), as well as the analytic method of “crystallization” described by Richardson (1994) and Janesick (2000). Because I was looking for large-scale emergent patterns, I followed complexity expert Bar-Yam’s metaphor of looking at the forest and the trees at the same time, with attention to the relationship between the two (2000), an approach also recommended by Mills (1959).

Thick Description, Polyphonic Texts and Subjective Perspectives

I drew from a number of contemporary and experimental techniques for writing anthropological texts. I used both “thick description” (Geertz 1973) and polyphonic voices at a number of levels. Following Wolf (1992), I presented the ethnographer’s perspective from several facets, including the subjective voice through excerpts from my journal. In this respect I was particularly influenced by Powdermaker (1966) Smith Bowen (1967), and Behar, all of whom experimented with what Behar calls “the vulnerable observer” (1996). I also utilized polyphonic texts (Fisher 1990; Huberman and Miles 1994; Helmreich 1998), privileging direct quotes and players’ own writing (such as the poems above), and posting my final analysis on a “participant blog” for participants to annotate. These efforts were all aimed towards taking a collaborative approach to the research and its presentation, acknowledging “native authority” while at the same time finding my own voice as the group’s ethnographer.

The Construction of “Refugee” and “Homeland”

Discourses of Displacement

Uru is not the first instance we have of game refugees, although this is an understudied aspect of MMOG culture. The very first graphical MMOG ever produced, *Meridian 59* opened in 1998, a few months before *Ultima Online*⁶, and closed in 2000. Due to popular demand from its fans, the game was reopened by its original designer in 2002 as an independent enterprise. While game refugees can result from closure, they can just as often be the outcome changes in a game or a lapse in popularity. A change in rules of *Star Wars Galaxies* that made the game easier to play, in effect negating the accomplishments (and status) of more experienced players, precipitated a mass exodus in 2005 (Kohler 2005). When I first began my *Uru* research in 2004, there was a group of 800 self-identified *Sims Online* Refugees in *There.com*. These players had independently adopted the practice of “trans-ludic” identities, recreating the same names and appearance as their avatars from *The Sims Online*.

The construction of “refugee” and “homeland” as markers of group identity arose entirely out of the play practices and discourse of the players themselves, clearly influenced by the connotations evoked by these terms in the culture at-large. In prior work, I’ve described the “social construction of identity” and pointed out that game communities are involved in a dynamic interplay between the individual and the group identity, and that the construction of individual identity is an intersubjective process (Pearce and Artemesia 2007). Nowhere can this be seen in greater relief than the *Uru* Diaspora. There was no one person who deemed the group “refugees;” rather, players began immediately adopting this terminology as soon as the game closed, and began to spontaneously construct and perform, in an emergent fashion, what I term a “fictive ethnicity.”

It is interesting to note that neither the concepts of “refugee” nor of “homeland,” appeared within the *Uru* community while the original game was in operation. Axel describes “homeland” as the “defining locality,” the “place of origin,” also the defining characteristic of diaspora; yet he also points out that diaspora is defined less by context but more by “loss of context” (2004:28). Given that discourses of “homeland” emerged among *Uru* players only when this “defining locality” was lost, it’s fair to say that the very notion of homeland was precipitated by its absence. We might think of the word “homeland” as a replacement for what is absent, a kind of phantom limb for what has been lost. Even the construct of “Uruvian” only emerged after the players were foisted from their “homeland.” As they established communities in other virtual worlds, it was this difference of having come from another place—a place that was destroyed in much the way original D’ni homeland was destroyed—that provided the scaffolding for this fictive ethnicity. Had *Uru* never closed, there would have been no need to formulate this fictive ethnicity nor the trans-ludic identities that supported it. Furthermore, the bond among *Uru* refugees was based on their shared history, memory and trauma of the loss

⁶ *Ultima Online* is often incorrectly credited as the first graphical MMOG; it was the second, and the first to become a commercial success.

of their homeland, and, to a lesser extent, a history that marked them as different from those around them.

As Gupta and Ferguson point out, “Remembered places have often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people... ‘Homeland’ in this way remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced peoples...” (1992:11)

Homeland

“Attachment to homeland can be intense...” asserts leading humanist-geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. “...home is the focal point of a cosmic structure... Should destruction occur we may reasonably conclude that the people would be thoroughly demoralized, since the ruin of their settlement implies the ruin of their cosmos” (1977:149).

“Yet...” he continues, “Human beings have strong recuperative powers. Cosmic view can be adjusted to suit new circumstances. With the destruction of one ‘center of the world,’ another can be built next to it, or in another location altogether, and in turn becomes ‘the center of the world.’” Thus “Center” is a “concept in mythic thought rather than a deeply felt value bound to unique events in locality.” Another way to state this might be that “homeland” is a state of mind (1977:149-150).

The notion of “homeland” is invariably tied to community. Homeland is seldom a singular association, is never simply ones “house” of origin, nor merely a location. Rather, it is a web of shared meanings, histories and narratives that individuals associate with both a specific place and with a shared identity. Homeland is at once experiential and symbolic and, as Michael Jackson might assert, inherently intersubjective (1998). A community’s “homeland” may have a different significance or no significance whatever to persons outside the group.

“Attachment of a deep though subconscious sort may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, with the memory of sounds and smells, of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time” (Tuan 1977:159). These associations are deeply tied to a sense of nostalgia, which is often embellished or modified in the continual retelling and reconstruction of narratives of homeland.

Placeness

Uru can be characterized as what Ito calls a “network locality” (1999), a sense of place achieved over the network, or to put it another way, a sense of “placeness.” Ito uses this term to refer primarily to text-based community sites, but the *Uru* experience brings this concept into bold relief by creating a virtual “place” that is visually rendered, explorable and inhabitable (Pearce and Artemesia 2009), and which players identify as a legitimate locality, though not a “real” place. Further these players think of this virtual network locality not only as a place they visit, but, distinctly, in the context of their trans-ludic activities, as the place they are *from*.

So what do we mean by terms such as “place” and “placeness”? Tuan describes “space” as “more abstract than ‘place.’ What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value.” So in the broadest terms, we might describe space in terms of its qualities—spaciousness, expanse, horizon, vista, etc., while place can be defined as a specific location imbued with specific cultural meaning. Tuan points out that the meaning of a place is often coupled with its narrative, such as Kronberg Castle in Denmark, also known as Helsingør, Shakespeare’s Elsinore (Tuan 1997:4). These narratives, whether “real,” “fictional,” or, as is often the case, somewhere in between, form much of foundation of what gives a generic space a sense of “place.” In contemporary theme park and themed retail design, building a fictional narrative around a synthetic or simulated space is a critical component of the design process. My professional career as an “experience designer,” or as I sometimes called it, a “themer,” involved crafting such fictional narratives to form the rationale for synthetically narrativized environments (Pearce 1997).

I have previously posited that the need for such synthetically narrativized environments arises from the growing sense of placenessness brought on by a highly westernized and genericized global marketplace (1997, 2007). Gupta and Ferguson have put it this way:

The irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient. It is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities (Anderson 1983) come to be attached to imagined places, as displaced peoples cluster around remembered or imagined homelands, places, or communities in a world that seems increasingly to deny such firm territorialized anchors in their actuality. (1992:10-11)

In their wonderfully astute pre-Internet analysis *Spaces of Identity*, Morely and Robins argue that the new “audiovisual geographies” (1995:11) of electronic media have precipitated a global identity crisis, by shifting the focus from “imagined communities” of nation states to the “placeless and non-referential sense of identity” of global markets. They point out that the capitalist framing of the global village fails to recognize that, as Rustin asserts, “...collective identities are formed through the common occupancy of space” (1987:34). They also cite Williams, who argues that in a world of “false and frenetic nationalisms and of reckless and uncontrollable transnationalism,” the struggle for meaningful communities and “actual social identities” is more and more difficult. “[We] have to explore new forms of variable societies...” (1983) What is called for, say Morely and Robins, is the “reclamation or reimagination of a sense of referential identity, the revaluation of particular and concrete experience” (39). In a strange twist, *Uru*, the very embodiment of an “audiovisual geography,” has become the site just such a reclamation.

Fictive Ethnicities and Imaginary Communities

The notion of fictive ethnicities, that is, attachments to ethnic identities of nonexistent, fictional cultures is not new nor even unique to networked communities. We see it instantiated in many forms, most famously among “trekkies,” Star Trek fans who have

adopted the fictive ethnicities of the races within the series, a form of what Jenkins called “participatory culture” (Jenkins 1992). At Dragon*Con, a multi-themed science fiction and fantasy fan convention held in Atlanta each year, groups of costumed players convene under the auspices of races and ethnic groups from fictional worlds. These can include elves and hobbits, zombies, vampires, and werewolves, pirates and denizens of the Renaissance, Anime and Neko characters, furies, steampunks, and space aliens of various races and origins, such as Martians, Wookies and Klingons. At Dragon*Con 2007, word spread that all attendees were invited to a Klingon wedding, provided they dressed as Klingons. Many fans of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series and its variegated derivatives, from *Dungeons and Dragons* to *World of Warcraft*, dress as and adopt the personae of fictional races at fan events. Part of the pleasure of this type of roleplay is the instant connection with a community of shared values and interests. As we found during our 2007 study of cosplay at Dragon*Con, the costume creates an affinity among roleplayers and costumers “from” the same fictional world, even if they are perfect strangers (Pearce et al 2008).

It is important to note here the distinction between Anderson’s “imagined communities,” and what might be better termed “imaginary communities.” Tuan asserts that “Culture is driven by imagination and is a product of imagination” (1977:xiv). In this sense, all communities are, to some extent, imagined. Anderson’s “imagined communities” arise from the complex interplay between history, geography, power, language, religion (belief) and culture and often explain the formation of nation states or historically-rooted communities that do not always exist in reality. The boundaries of nation states, often the artifact of colonial occupation, can define as communities groups that have no sense of natural affinity (1983). In spite of the fact that they “live” in different “nations,” one could argue that members of the Uru Diaspora have a stronger sense of shared ethnicity, than the residents of, say, “Iraq,” an imagined community by Anderson’s definition. It’s true that the Uru Diaspora also has sects and sub-groups, but, oddly, in some respects “Uruvian” is less “imagined” than the ethnic designation of “Iraqi.”

We tend to think of ethnicity as assigned by location and context of birth. But the Uru Diaspora’s discretionary ethnicity forces us to interrogate fundamental issues of nation, territory, culture and identity. Gupta and Ferguson point out that there is often a tendency to take for granted the relationships between these elements of culture, as epitomized by the bright colors used to distinguish nation states on a map; however, in practice, the relationship between culture and place is much more complex, especially in the context of post-colonialism, dispersed immigrant and refugee communities, and border cultures that exist at the interstices between territories. They assert that:

... issues of collective identity today do seem to take on a special character, when more and more of us live in what Said (1979:18) has called "a generalized condition of homelessness," a world where identities are increasingly coming to be, if not wholly deterritorialized, at least differently territorialized. (1992:9)

The Uru Diaspora is just such a “differently territorialized identity,” in which in a fictional or virtual world is adopted as a “homeland,” and thus by definition, becomes a marker of identity.

The Uru Community as “Distributed Diaspora”

While the terms “refugee” and “homeland” were part of the terminology for their status invented by players themselves, I introduced the “diaspora” into the lexicon to describe the trans-ludic *Uru* community. What does it mean to say a distributed community is diasporic? Since they are already “not in the same place,” geographically dispersed, isn’t this term somewhat redundant? While it is true that all distributed communities are, in some way, by definition, diasporic, what differs here is that the *Uru* community is “trans-ludic,” meaning that they are not distributed merely in geographical space, but also distributed in virtual space. We might call such a group a “distributed diaspora” as a way to describe their dispersion in a variety of distributed online environments.

I realize that the term “diaspora” is highly contested, but since an extended debate on the various interpretations of the term is well beyond both the scope of this paper and the expertise of this author, it might be useful to at least select one that is fairly well recognized, though debated, as a starting point. Drawing on Safran, Clifford summarizes diaspora as being characterized by a history of dispersal, myths/memories of homeland, including the desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, alienation in the host country, and a collective identity importantly defined by these relationships (1994:5). Safran describes a diaspora as a group or community which (1) is dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places; (2) maintains a “memory, vision or myth about their original homeland”; (3) has a real or imagined sense that they are not fully accepted in their host country; (4) sees the ancestral home as a place of eventual return; (5) is committed to the maintenance and restoration of this homeland; and (6) maintains a group consciousness and solidarity that are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationships to homeland (Safran 1991:83-84). While this definition may be debatable for some communities—the African and Jewish Diasporas, for instance, may not fit all these criteria—there is no question that the Uru Diaspora fulfills these requirements. Nothing in either Safran or Clifford’s schema suggests that the homeland must be “real;” virtual and even imaginary homelands are not disqualified.

Interlude: Consuming Production/Play Practice as Metaphor

I realize that there is risk of falling into some traps here so before closing I wish to address the obvious issue: *Uru* is the product of a capitalist system of media production and consumption. Much of what this paper describes falls under the rubric of what I call “productive play,” an emerging phenomenon in which play transgresses into creative or work-like activities (Pearce and Artemesia 2006). Virtual worlds such as *There.com* and *Second Life* have a structure that inverts the classic producer/consumer relationship and creates a scenario where players are actually consuming the right to produce. All of the player discourses described in this paper fall within a range of practices around participatory and productive play culture. I also want to make clear that invoking terms such as “homeland,” “refugee” and “diaspora” is in no way meant to trivialize the traumas, violence and tragedy that typically accompany real-world refugee narratives.

These terms are used here in a metaphorical sense, although they are clearly evocative of strong emotions and associations in the players who adopted them. Furthermore, players are clearly aware that their experiences is bounded in the context of play, in the same way that Bateson identified the ability of both humans and animals to tell the difference between “real” and “play” fighting (1972).***

Conclusion: Uru Diaspora as Allegory

In his classic essay “On Ethnographic Allegory,” James Clifford treats “ethnography itself as a performance emplotted by powerful stories” (1986:98). Allegory, says Clifford, is a “representation that interprets itself” (99). The narrative of the Uru Diaspora operates as just such an allegory.

It is difficult to ignore the multifaceted complex allegories and ironies that span the “fiction” of *Uru* and the lived experience of its players. Players engage in a game about restoring the lost culture of a refugee community, only to become refugees themselves. They then set about restoring their own culture, engaging in both a performance and a game that is at once “real” and “fictional.” Building off a narrative about creating worlds, they create their own sub-worlds within other, larger virtual worlds. That this narrative sits within the larger context of a “global village” this is increasingly diluting the relationship between identity and place forces us to take a step back and ask ourselves: what does the story of the Uru Diaspora say about culture at-large?

We inhabit a moment in which abstract and generalized global markets, combined with Western notions of individualism, have preempted the primacy of local communities and the reassurance of a connected identity. Tuan points out that the reification of individuality can also lead to a sense of isolation and vulnerability which, in nonwestern and even earlier western cultures, was mitigated by ties to place and community (1977). As pointed out by some of the authors cited here, the growing sense of placelessness has precipitated a worldwide identity crisis. Without the emotional connection to specific place and specific community that have sustained our ancestors at many scales for many generations, where does that leave us in terms of identity? We can, as is happening throughout the world, take refuge in the imagined regional communities of nationalism, or the transnational identifies of religious sectarianism and extremism, or real-world diasporic cultures that may or may not represent a common cultural affinity. Unlike ourselves and our ancestors who were born into their proximal cultural contexts, however, the Uru Diaspora has *chosen* its culture, and its members have adopted a fictive ethnicity at their own discretion. In a sense they’ve created a new form of discretionary ethnicity, one which is based on imagination, shared values and a collective identity that go with a connection to place that may be fast fading from our cultural landscape.

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