

AFK – Away From Keyboard, Place In The Sims Online

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Abstract: *The Sims Online computer game engages ideas of place where construction of a place is contingent on the conceptual fusion of space and experience. This paper discusses the ways in which this fusion occurs in this exceptionally popular digital environment. I explore how both the space and the subject (required to mediate, record and name experience) are represented. Two familiar architectural devices are used to construct space in the game; the map and the axonometric, as historical tropes that remain active in digital space. An avatar or Sim operates as the experiencing subject in the game and the oscillating relationship between the body of the Sim and the body of the player is teased out. Finally, the place that results from the fusion of space and experience in this particular environment is described and analysed.*

Keywords: *online computer games, Sims, place*

Introduction

In early 2003 Electronic Arts launched *The Sims Online*, a massively multiplayer online game known by gamers as TSO. Unlike other popular online games such as Everquest, TSO has attracted female players and other traditional non-gamers in record-breaking numbers. TSO is described by its creator Will Wright as ‘a game about real life... you have to make strategic decisions about how to spend your time, and when you make those decisions you try to maximise your happiness, either long or short term’ (Terdiman, 2003). Some players attend to the competitive aspects of the game, attempting to become the most popular or wealthiest Sim, while others focus on developing interpersonal relationships. Computer games form the largest part of the entertainment economy and are recognised as ‘subtle yet powerful methods of enculturation by which social values, interaction styles and everyday activities are practiced’ (Flanagan, 2003). In TSO the site of this enculturation is not a place of fantasy or mythology, wizards, dungeons and dragons, but is instead the familiar domestic, the suburb, the neighbourhood; it could be argued that it is a game in which the lines between fantasy and reality are more than usually blurry. Whatever their motivation, the place that is TSO is attractive to over one million players.

Place is a slippery concept. How does a generic sense of space shift to the significant identification of place? J. Nicholas Entrikin, in his humanistic engagement with place, approaches this shift through the lens of cultural geography and describes the *specificity*

inherent to place. Space becomes place due to ‘the conceptual fusion of space and experience that gives areas of the Earth’s surface a “wholeness” or “individuality”’ (Enriken, 1991, p. 6). To experience something firsthand one must feel immersed in, in fact be the subject of the action, and the action must unfold around oneself in a convincing fashion. Further, to construct place the experience must be enacted in such a way that limits or boundaries can be identified and recalled in order for the individuation, the ‘wholeness’ of a place, to be achieved. For identification and recollection of any place naming is also essential.

Different computer games utilise different methods of representation to encode the generic space of the software with a specific and identifiable ‘whole’ sense of place. In TSO the historic tropes of cartography and axonometric projection construct the initial location of the player in what I call the game-place. As with many computer games, the player experience is mediated via an avatar and through text. This paper investigates the braiding of the constructed game-place and the experiential place of the player/avatar.

Entering the game-place, entering the experience

To give a sense of the game I will briefly describe my initial foray into TSO. The first step is to create a Sim and there are many options to consider. There is a choice of two hundred and thirty five heads, each of which can be modified by the alteration of hairstyle and skin colour. The next step is to browse TSO universe from above and to descend somewhere into it. Hovering above, in far zoom mode, I experienced a strange sensation of floating similar to the liminal space of air travel. I felt nervous, after all this was unfamiliar territory and I was to be a foreigner. Eventually I decided to take the plunge in a town called Tropical Falls Paradise.



*Figure 1: The Sims Online, the far zoom view.
(Image supplied by Electronic Arts)*

Browsing over gridded land, known in TSO as 'lots', textual information appears indicating who is 'at home' – places inhabited by Sims whose players are currently online. I found Taz, home alone. I entered his house and introduced myself as a new player. He offered to show me around his house and introduce me to the workings of the game, prefacing his offer with the warning 'but no kissing – I'm taken'. I asked if he (at least the Sim presented with male gender attributes) meant in real life or the game. Both, was his reply.

Taz instructed me to keep 'greening'. A player must attend to aspects of performance in order to maintain the health and wealth of a Sim. My food area needed greening. Taz made us a meal in his kitchen and as I ate, by clicking on the animated meal, my Sim made animated actions that resembled eating. Sitting in front of my computer, I watched my food bar become green. Taz kindly showed me the bathroom, where we both used the toilet, and then he had showered while I had a bath, taking care of two areas that needed greening, bladder and hygiene. Later our Sims slept, more greening, and then we played pool in order to green up our fun category. Our Sims did all these actions in their animated ways but became pixellated at certain, more private times. All the while we were talking via the chat function, comic-like text bubbles appearing above our Sims' heads.

After two and a half hours I did feel familiar with Taz, just as though I had met him in the flesh and had conversed in a concentrated fashion. It was time to get the dinner, to literally green up, and I was reluctant to say goodbye. Strangely, I didn't feel as though I could just get up from the computer and leave my Sim frozen and speechless in Taz's presence. I had to say goodbye properly, remove my Sim and shut the machine down.

Constructing the game-place: the map and the axonometric

I have described the process of entering the game; the movement from a construction of a bird's eye view of the landscape – termed the 'far zoom', placing the gamer in outer space – to the edge of the interior via the axonometric view. Both these graphic systems come replete with a history of representing, perhaps constructing and certainly naming places.

The Western cartographic system is a mastery of place through sight. Maps are codified objects and their reading and authority lies in an understanding and acceptance of this code. The map is a tool of the coloniser. Simon Ryan argues that the first step of the explorer, who represents the colonial power, is to construct the space of the land as new, unknown, under-utilised and empty, as available for inscription. Any other non-Western system of mapping, must therefore be seen as unreliable and as having no authority, in order for this clean slate, a *tabula rasa*, to be available for and in fact require, colonising. As Ryan explains 'the space

of empire ... is understood as objectively being "out there", a natural state, alternatives to which are difficult to imagine' (Ryan, 1997, p. 4).

Mapping in TSO is used to represent both spatial and social relations. The use of maps, bird's eye views and map-like spatial diagrams doubly orientate the viewer. They codify the space as place, but also codify the place as 'real'. The use of the familiar language of mapping asserts not only that there is geography there, but further, that it is a landscape to be colonised and settled upon; a space in which empires might be inscribed.



Figure 2: *The Sims Online*, the near zoom view.
(Image supplied by Electronic Arts)

Paul Carter describes the anxious doubling that occurs as cartographic inscription meets the realities of surface: 'As a mapping device the linear net, the survey throws over the land creates a set of ideal locations. Anxiety occurs when it is found that these ideal representations do not correspond to the environment we inhabit. Then the fantasy of access to endlessly multiplying squares of land turns into its opposite: an experience of being hemmed in or isolated' (Carter, 2004, p. 86). TSO game-place provides 'ideal representations' of the earth devoid of this anxiety. Players may endlessly appropriate, demarcate, name and occupy places; the fantasy of endless access is lived out as the game-place provides an infinite frontier.

However, one more click and we come down to ground; a ground that is, in TSO space, duplicitous. In the game-place, buildings and their environs are represented through axonometric projection. The axonometric is a vexed architectural drawing. Yve-Alain Bois, in his essay *The Metamorphosis of Axonometry*, describes the uncanny liberation of the eye produced by the axonometric. In the axonometric 'there is no negation of depth; instead it is geometrically rendered "infinite": the eye is no longer fixed in a specific place, and the view is no longer trained and "petrified"' (Bois, 1981, p. 46).

In viewing the axonometric, the roving eye – positioned outside and above, never in a *specific place* – takes in this infinite depth. Consequently, interiority in axonometric representation can never be enclosing, it can only be presented at a distance by allowing planes of walls and roofs to become transparent or cutaway. Bois describes the drawing's fundamental ambiguity: 'the axonometric image is reversible; it tears free of the ground ... facilitating aerial views' (Bois, 1981, p. 56). In the axonometric rendering of architecture, cladding and roofs are shorn away letting the outside in, revealing all interiority to the passing and limitless gaze. Although axonometric renderings are drawn to scale, they do not represent scale in relation to a horizon as in perspective drawing. Consequently, the representation of scale is measurable but not experiential. Schneider says that the axonometric 'depict[s] only one side of the object, indicating neither the distance from the viewer nor the object's height in relation to the viewer's eye level' (Schneider, 1981, p. 81).

This lack of horizon, denial of ground and reversibility of solid and void produces in TSO a domestic space that evades enclosure. It might simulate the domestic but it can never surround and suffocate the player in the way the actual domestic might. Perhaps this in part explains why a simulation of the familiar domestic might still make an engaging place for a game. This lack of spatial enclosure, of interiority, however, is complicated, and effaced by the experience of the placement within multiple bodies, an effect which will be discussed further.

Inside and outside, the porous boundary of the game-place

Why is it relevant to talk about space, place and landscape in relation to a computer game in this particular forum that brings together discourse concerning the interior and the landscape? Spatial relations within the constructed TSO game-place simulate a real world binary system – internal versus external, public versus private, the domestic spaces equating interiority and the landscape equating exteriority. And, as I have identified, the design of the game-place utilises familiar architectural tropes. However, the actual experience of playing of the game renders these boundaries complex, testing concepts of interior and exterior inhabitation.

In TSO, internal and external states are multiple and nested rather than singular and opposed. Within the game-place, modes of behaviour and language are specific, marking it with a boundary determined by a shared culture and codes of practice.

The player's actual corporeality is of course external to the game but, as seen by Taz's edict regarding the propriety of kissing, it may also spill over into the game-place.¹ In a reversal of this, the game-place spills out, interacting with 'real' world systems of commerce and

communication. For instance, players create website diaries where the life of their Sim is documented and 'fleshed out'. Others have started up web-based newspapers, reporting events from their particular place within the game. Commercial transactions also breach the porous boundary of the game-place. Johnny Lace, recently retired from the game, designated himself the occupation of Sim architect. On his website he advertised his business. Players could contract Lace to design houses for them with payment in Simoleans, the 'local' currency. While Lace's transactions remain within the boundaries of TSO economy, others bleed out into actual commerce. At the online Mall of the Sims, players purchase accessories such as clothes by the designer Ralph Lauren. These items can be downloaded into the game-place, but are purchased via credit card transaction with hard rather than soft currency.

In all of these examples, actions, events and transactions are recorded and named. As I have pointed out, naming allows for the specificity inherent in place. Allucquère Rosanne Stone, in her early investigations of cyberspace, identifies the powerful transaction that occurs through naming; '... to enact naming within the highly charged world of surfaces that is cyberspace is to appropriate the surfaces, to incorporate the surfaces into one's own. Penetration translates into envelopment. In other words, to enter cyberspace is to physically *put on* cyberspace" (Stone, 1991, p. 109). Invoking Toyo Ito's description of architecture as 'media-suit', this concept of place as something that can be worn upsets any easy demarcations of inside and out.



Figure 3: *The Cukoo Zoo*, a Johnny Lace Design from *The Sims Online*.
(Image supplied by Johnny Lace)

Experiential place, unlimited body

Stone and other influential theorists of cyberspace such as Donna Haraway and Sherry Turkle, have discussed the many seductive and complex qualities of the avatar at length.

The narrative of leaving the body/meat behind is central to much cyber fiction with William Gibson's novels the most cited examples. In TSO the player creates an avatar called a Sim. Is there a distance between the player and the Sim or do they collapse into the same entity?

The official Electronic Arts Games website for TSO takes both positions, simultaneously flipping between the personal *you* and the possessive *your* when talking about the Sim. The following quote is indicative of this fluctuation:

There's a special category of actions called 'Attitudes', where you can set the way your Sim idles, meaning they'll keep doing that action until you tell them to do otherwise. For example, you make your Sim act like they're 'In Love' while they're pouring their heart out to a potential date. Or you can set them to 'Arrogant' if they're starting a fight with someone. Either way, these are all tools for your amusement. So explore your options and express yourself (Trottier, 2002).

In this text, there is an oscillation between *you*, using the various settings to further *your* communication, and *your Sim* expressing its own feelings. Agency is bought into question. Your Sim might perform animated actions that portray a state of being in love but it is the player who is pouring their heart out because actual communication in the game can only occur via the text functions produced by real flesh fingers pressing on a keyboard. In Elizabeth Grosz's view the particular allure of virtual technologies is the 'half formed promise ... of the ideal of a world of one's own that one can share with others through consensus but that one can enter or leave at will, over whose movements and processes one can exert a measure of control, and that brings with it a certain guarantee of pleasure without danger' (Grosz, 2001, p. 82). The action of oscillating in and out of the body of the Sim produces a distance that allows the fantasy of 'pleasure without danger' for TSO players.



Figure 4: The Sims Online, Sim taking a bath.
(Image supplied by Electronic Arts)

This corporeal fluctuation was apparent to me in playing the game. The strangeness I felt when using the bathroom at the same time as another Sim, and the fact that the propriety of pixellation is activated, indicated a degree of immersion in the corporeal state of the avatar. However, at other times, this was effaced. We could keep communicating and our vision remained active and mobile although our Sims slept. The relationship between the two bodies, one physical and one representational, is complex.

I have already examined the distancing effect of the axonometric, as it detaches the eye from the ground/horizon and positions it outside and above, allowing it to roam. In contrast to TSO many other computer games use one-point perspective views to render space, binding the eye of the player to the eye of the avatar. Known in film as the 'point of view shot', this is the moment when the viewer/player, the camera and the character collapse into one identity, easing the moment of the suspension of disbelief. In TSO the player's eyes are everywhere, all at once, and not fixed to the viewpoint of the Sim. In the production of place the body plays a central role, mediating the environment through the filter of the senses, which in turn activate recognition and memory. These perceptual mechanisms are mostly absent in TSO. The production of place therefore is disconnected from the body but reinforced in other ways. The space constructed is not the enclosing place of architecture but is instead the fluctuating place of a conversation.

Conclusion

In TSO two modalities create a place in the space of the machine. In the first, the modality of the game-place, pre-digital, spatial representational devices construct a 'scene' in which to demarcate a place of specificity. As I have demonstrated, the historic conventions of the map and the axonometric carry into cyberspace. The game-place is thus constructed by the map as a place ripe for inscription, a frontier without anxiety. This inscription is formed through modelling the axonometric – the ungrounded projection lacking true enclosure, exposes interiority to the passing gaze and produces a domestic that does not contain and lacks limits.

The second place-making modality is that of the experiential place of the player as he/she is immersed, or not, in the body of the avatar and subject to the shared cultures and conventions of the community. If places are constructed through the conceptual fusion of experience and space, a subject is required to mediate, record and name the experiences. In computer games the avatar acts as the player's agent, some have used the term 'puppet', through which such experiences are sought. In TSO this agency oscillates; the official game literature never clearly positions the Sim as either something the player owns and directs or something the player *is*. The player can transcend the body of the Sim, can leave the body

of the Sim at will, but remain within the game and can carry on communicating with other players while the Sim sleeps; all of this points to a fluctuating relationship between the agent and the player. The result of this oscillation of agency, in combination with the lack of interiority in the game-place, is a subject-hood that is easily accessed and released, allowing for Grosz's 'pleasure without danger'.

The place constructed in TSO through these two modalities is, to borrow Louis Marin's terms, a topic rather than topographic place. Marin defines the two terms: the topographic place is a 'fragment of space possessing its own unity', while the topic place is 'rhetorical and poetic' (Marin, 1984, p. 115).² In TSO, the body, digital and real, is a place-making device for this rhetorical, poetic space. The biological needs of the body, for filling and emptying, are parodied in the game to punctuate the spatially located but disembodied conversation. TSO can be seen as the extension of a chat-room, a neologism that neatly provides a spatial referent for a text based conversation. However, and as I have argued, TSO provides a far more complex spatial referent: a body in which the conversation can, sometimes, be housed.

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Endnotes

- ¹ For an investigation of intimacy in cyberspaces see Sherry Turkle's work *The Economy of Sex, Intimacy and Fidelity in MUDs* in, Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the internet*, New York: Simon and Schuster, especially the chapter titled 'Tiny Sex and gender trouble'.
- ² Interestingly Marin locates all utopian projects as topic rather than topographic and others have read TSO as a utopian experiment.