PERFORMANCE AND BECOMING: RETHINKING NATIVE-NESS IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine how the notions of belonging and native-ness are enacted in virtual communities. It draws from an ethnographically inspired study of the players of a MMORPG that is explored through three key dimensions: space, time and language. Drawing on concepts developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I argue that the notion of native-ness, in the case of virtual communities, is best approached as a performance embedded in the process of becoming. In that sense, one *is* not but rather *becomes* a member of a virtual community. This process of becoming entails an exploration of smooth forms of space and the appropriation of a vernacular form of language.

Key words: virtual communities, native-ness, Gilles Deleuze, temporality, spatiality, language

INTRODUCTION

The continuous development of information technologies has opened up new spaces of inquiry for social scientists (Hiltz and Wellman, 1997; Fernback, 1999; Shaviro, 2003) and has allowed for the re-exploration of certain themes and concepts, such as the notion of community. The ambiguity around the term 'community' (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999; Mason, 2000; Rothaermel and Sugiyama, 2001) is also encountered in discourses on virtual communities (Lee et al., 2003). There is a dense literature on virtual communities; this includes research that has looked at the motives for joining virtual communities (Ridings et al., 2002; Bakardjieva, 2003), the consequences of joining virtual communities (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Ginsburg and Weisband, 2004), the

practices of knowledge sharing (Koh and Kim, 2004; Hsu et al., 2007), just to name but a few. This article seeks to contribute to the literature on virtual communities by exploring the ways in which the notion of native-ness (i.e. belonging) is enacted and performed in virtual communities. In other words, the focal point of this article revolves around the ways in which virtual communities enact native-ness. In order to explore this question, I suggest three key dimensions to the study of virtual communities: time, space and language. Upon investigating these dimensions, I seek to emphasize the processual and relational dimensions of the constitution of virtual communities. Rather than thinking communities through the lens of stability and being, this article suggests approaching the idea of native-ness as a performance embedded in a process of becoming.

The three dimensions aforementioned have been explored through the study of one free-of-access MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) developed by Youzu Interactive: *League of Angels*. The research spanned over a period of one year and was ethnographically inspired. It involved joining various guilds (both English and French-speaking) on different servers, conducting phases of participant observation, visiting forums as well as other associated pages on the game, etc. The methodology employed is referred to as *nomadic inquiry*: while it is inspired by ethnographic research, it does not fulfil all the predicaments of ethnography in the strictest sense of the word.

The collaborative work of Gilles Deleuze with Felix Guattari (1986, 1987) has constituted the conceptual basis of this article. More precisely, virtual communities are explored through the relation between striated and smooth forms of space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), through the processes of territorialisation and de-territorialisation (ibid), and through the themes of nomadicity and vernacularism (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). While the work of Deleuze and Guattari has

appealed to a handful of scholars in the field of game studies (Giddings, 2007; Sutton and Martin-Jones, 2008; Harper, 2009; Cremin, 2012), it remains a nascent field of exploration (Cremin, 2015). Here, I argue that the virtual community associated with *League of Angels* is characterised by a nomadic way of organizing embedded in the process of becoming. More precisely, the virtual community studied enacts various forms of temporality, finds a mode of expression through a vernacular form of language and thrives on a combination of smooth and striated spaces. These different aspects lead to the appreciation of virtual communities as performative assemblages.

  The article is structured as follows. The next section briefly reviews the literature on the notion of communities and provides a definition for virtual communities. The third section presents the methodology used to conduct the research and introduces the MMORPG community studied. The following section reflects over the notions of time and space in relation to the virtual community investigated. The penultimate section examines the language used by this virtual community and the conclusion reflects over the enactment of the notion of native-ness in the context of virtual communities.

DEFINING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

  There is a marked difficulty when it comes to reaching a consensual definition for the notion of 'community' (Hillery, 1955; Komito, 1998; Driskell and Lyon, 2002). Similarly to other concepts that have travelled across disciplines (especially these concepts emanating from anthropology[i]), the term 'community' has reached a point of semantic satiation to the extent that it covers a wide

array of possibilities and realities. Characteristics recurrently mentioned in the literature include stability and the presence of boundaries (Anderson, 1999), the preponderance of social ties (Hillery, 1955) as well as spatial reference to a specific place (Orum, 1998). These characteristics suggest the possibility to distinguish clearly between the members of the community (the so-called natives) and *the others*. Such distinction can become spurious when translated onto virtual communities, as members of one community can be simultaneously part of a variety of communities (Wilson and Peterson, 2002).

Similar difficulties arise when it comes to defining virtual communities (Lee et al., 2003; Porter, 2004). There is a wealth of definitions that capture different aspects of these communities (See Rheingold, 1993; Romm and Clarke, 1995; Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). Wilson and Peterson (2002) suggest bypassing dualisms (e.g. online/offline, virtual/real, here/there) and argue in favour of a fluid approach to the understanding of communities. Besides, while some have argued that virtual spaces may allow for the re-flourishing of communities (Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Haythornthwaite, 2001; Wellman, 2001), others have cast doubts on the validity and appropriateness of the term community when it comes to online spaces (Calhoun, 1991; Sardar, 1996; Driskell and Lyon, 2002). Here, I seek to adopt a fluid perspective on the notion of virtual community by attaching three core dimensions to its definition. By no means does this attempt to provide a 'panoramic' and all-encompassing perspective on virtual communities, but rather to expose a particular *point de vue* (point of view and viewpoint) to the study of virtual communities[ii]. Furthermore, these three dimensions are deemed to be highly relevant to virtual communities and more particularly to these communities associated with online games. These three dimensions are: spatiality, temporality and language. Besides, no particular conceptual dimension is attached to the term 'virtual'. While there is a multitude of dialectics in which the notion of virtual can be plugged

(virtual/real, virtual/actual, virtual/material, etc.), the term 'virtual' is simply used to refer to the medium (the internet) through which the community becomes assembled.

The first two dimensions are time and space. Despite being scattered in different time zones, players implicitly share the time of the given online space. Space is absolutely pivotal when discussing virtual communities (Mitra and Schwartz, 2001; Boellstorf, 2008; Pearce, 2011) as the lack of 'concrete space' for virtual spaces may be raised as a potential issue. The third dimension is language. It refers to the use of particular idioms and specific linguistic codes within a particular community. Language is understood as a key vector of social cohesion and as such, linguistic particularities underlie any gathering of individuals (see the case of dialects or patois for instance). Crystal (2001) prophesized that the internet revolution would lead to a linguistic revolution and as such, language constitutes a key dimension in the study of virtual communities. Wilson and Peterson (2002) have also highlighted the importance of language when it comes to studying online communities. While this characterization of virtual communities around three themes may convey the impression that communities are simply re-presented and generalized, the aforementioned themes simply act as possible directions or pointers in the study of virtual communities.

METHODOLOGICAL ENDEAVOUR: NOMADIC INQUIRY

The virtual community explored in this paper is the players of an online game: *League of Angels*. The game was developed by Youzu Interactive and released in 2013[iii]. It can be accessed from several platforms (e.g. r2games, kabam, etc.). The game is free of access and simply requires the creation of an account – involving a valid email address and a pseudonym. However, certain features, items or upgrades can only be obtained by purchasing in-game currencies – diamonds in the case of *League of Angels*. By purchasing packages of this in-game currency, players can

acquire new clothes, wings as well as a variety of items that will enhance their status, power and equipment. This game possesses various forms of internal communication (world chat, guild chat, team chat, faction chat as well as private chat). The main goal of the game is to increase one's strength, which involves completing quests, acquiring new equipment, recruiting heroes, etc. In most cases, players organize themselves in guilds and compete within the server or during cross-server tournaments. For this game, a forum as well as 'wiki pages' have been designed in order to ensure that players can have access to a well-updated source of information regarding the game and to foster communication outside the realm of the game itself.

The method(ology) used to explore the virtual community associated with *League of Angels* is ethnographically inspired. The use of ethnography for the study of virtual spaces has stirred numerous debates (Hakken, 1999; Jacobson, 1999; Miller and Slater, 2000; Beaulieu, 2004) with some doubting the compatibility between the two (Aycock and Buchigani, 1995). Certainly, the turn towards online spaces as fields of empirical exploration has propelled an adaptation of the research methods involving fieldwork investigation and ethnography (Jones, 1998; Hine, 2000; Ruhleder, 2000; Gatson and Zweerink, 2004; Robinson and Schultz, 2009; Hallett and Barber, 2014). Ethnography has been deployed in many areas of investigation in relation to online spaces; this has included research on the construction of identity (Donath, 1999), on online romance (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004), on human relations (Carter, 2005), just to name but a few. Ethnographic modes of inquiry have also been widely employed in the field of games studies (Taylor, 2006; Boelstorff, 2008; Chen, 2009; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2011; Boelstorff et al., 2012). This plurality of accounts has been accompanied by a certain linguistic or lexical cacophony in relation to the multitude of terminologies used – online ethnography, virtual ethnography (Mason, 1996), netnography (Kozinets, 1998; 2010), multi-sited cyberethnography (Pearce, 2011), virtual anthropology

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(Boelstorff, 2008), ethnography of online/digital/virtual communities – which led to a lack of clarity as to what exactly the object of the enquiry was and how the study was to be performed. Here, I use the expression *nomadic inquiry* to characterise the methodological endeavour of this research. Such terminology aims to highlight that the research is not ethnographic (in the strictest sense of the word) and to reflect the deep, polymorphic and complex engagement online research requires. As compared to more 'traditional' forms of ethnography, a nomadic inquiry is concerned with a different way of engaging with space through research activities. In certain ways, a nomadic inquiry echoes back to Marcus's (1995) initial advocacy for multi-sited ethnography as a way of challenging the boundarisation of the empirical site and of further exploring dynamic practices or patterns of action. In relation to virtual spaces, the notion of boundary is highly specious: researchers needs to engage with the object of the study, regardless of where this leads them[iv]. As Hine (2000) argued, "*the object of ethnographic enquiry can usefully be reshaped by concentrating on flow and connectivity rather than location and boundary as the organizing principle*" (2000: 64). Research on online spaces can raise a variety of ethical issues (Thomas, 1996; Jacobson, 1999). Throughout the research, caution has been exercised in order to preserve the anonymity and privacy of the community studied: this article does not contain any pseudonyms, direct quotes or references to one specific server. These measures have clearly contributed to ensuring confidentiality and privacy for the members of the community. All the information used in this article emanate from participant observation and from posts in forums (which are open to the public).

The investigation involved conducting numerous phases of participant observation[v] on both older and newer servers (five servers in total) in order to get a wider picture of the ways in which the various platforms were organized as well as joining a variety of guilds. While more servers

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could have been joined, it was assumed that spending more time in a restrained number of servers would be more insightful than simply logging onto all the servers (well over 250 servers) for a very limited amount of time. The study was mainly articulated around English-speaking environments. However, given that servers are usually characterized by the time zone they follow (European servers, Oceanic servers, East Coast American servers and West Coast American servers), the status of English as *lingua franca* can occasionally be challenged, as certain other languages would sometimes become prevalent within a guild (e.g. Malay/Indonesian language in Oceanic servers, Romanian in European servers). Therefore, the investigation also involved spending some time on these servers or within guilds where English was not always the dominant language. More precisely, this entailed membership in French-speaking guilds on both European and American servers. As highlighted by Crystal (2001), there is a paucity of accounts exploring non-English online 'communities' and as such, there is much interest in exploring these. The next section explores the first two dimensions – time and space – in relation to the virtual community of *League of Angels* players.

SPATIALITY AND TEMPORALITY: ENACTING SMOOTH AND STRIATED FORMS OF SPACE

The first two themes that I suggested in the study of virtual communities relate to the notions of time and space. Time and space are key aspects of virtual communities. Virtual communities can be said to present a shared sense of temporality (Boellstorff, 2008). In *League of Angels*, players all share the temporality of the game, which is the time zone on which the game is aligned (four different time zones: Oceanic, US East Coast, US West Coast and European). Players are made to

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comply with certain temporal features of the game. For instance, various individual (e.g. Quiz, Wyrm Race) as well as collective activities (e.g. Team Arena, Gauntlet) occur at very specific times. As these events grant resources, it is clearly in the players' interest to ensure that they attend these events. Besides, one can note that attending guild or team events (such as Team Arena) occurring at a defined time enhances the cohesion of the community. However, this solely covers one aspect of the game as a wide array of activities and tasks can be completed at the player's convenience. For these activities that are not time-bound but yet require a party, players tend to organize themselves following their own time zones. For instance, on US East and West servers, European players would complete team dungeons together. Therefore, there is a main temporality – that of the game and its time zone – that is shared amongst, or rather imposed on, all the players. Alongside this primary form of temporality, one can observe other ways of enacting time through the actions of the different players. When players share a time zone (that is different to that of the server) and gather to accomplish certain activities, they enact their own temporality through the game. In that sense, there are various forms of temporality enacted through the actions of the players. This virtual community is thus characterized by the enactment of a multitude of temporalities and at certain times, a specific temporality becomes more prevalent than the other(s). This is for instance the case when some players would suggest completing a team dungeon when team arena (an event set at a particular time) is active. In this case, the temporality of the game, expressed through the occurrence of the team arena event, would be prevalent over the other temporality due to the fact that it is a time-bound activity. This prompts us to suggest the presence of a temporal hierarchy that can become challenged on various occasions. In that sense, the temporality enacted in *League of Angels* is not linear but rather fragmented, unstable and multidirectional.

In many ways, how we conceptualise and approach ideas of time cannot be readily separated from accounts on space. Early critiques of online methodologies have argued that online communities may lack a sense of space. While it may be difficult to think about a shared place for a virtual community (providing that we think of place in material terms), there is certainly not a lack of a space (see De Certeau (1984) on the difference between space and place). Virtual communities have been liberated from the traditional constraints of place (Wellman, 2001; Driskell and Lyon, 2002) as the geographical distance between the members of the virtual community ceases to matter (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Carter, 2005; Nieckarz 2005). Ideas of space can be difficult to conceptualize when it comes to virtual communities. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) develop an insightful approach to space whereby they distinguish between two forms of space: smooth and striated. They firstly introduce the two forms of space through a comparison between two games: Chess and Go (a Chinese board game). The game of Chess is presented as coded since each piece (knight, pawn, bishop, etc.) has intrinsic qualities and values. In other words, each piece moves according to very precise and carefully established rules (e.g. bishops can solely move diagonally). On the contrary, Go pieces are simple pellets without any intrinsic qualities but with situational properties (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The value of the pellet is then not determined by internal qualities (as it was the case in the game of Chess) but through the relation to its environment (e.g. layout of the game, other pellets, etc.). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that while the game of Chess codes and decodes space (through the intrinsic qualities and values given to its pieces), Go territorializes and de-territorializes space (as manifested in the situational properties of its pellets). In simple terms, de-territorialisation is a movement that produces change by entailing the dissolution of cultural codes and the setting aside of identity as a framework of reference. Through its intrinsic qualities and its reliance on coding

mechanisms, the game of Chess is an instance of striated space. Conversely, with the situational properties of its pieces and the possibility to de-territorialize space, Go is an example of smooth space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In other words, if coding and decoding relate to striated spaces, then it is territorialisation and deterritorialization that characterize smooth spaces. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have it, "*in striated space, one closes off a surface and "allocates" it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks; in the smooth, one "distributes" oneself in an open space, according to frequencies and in the course of one's crossings*" (1987: 481). It is key to remember that these two forms of space are not wedged in any dialectical opposition as the two are only found in mixture (Buchanan and Lambert, 2005); "*the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: "smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 474). If a smooth space can be made striated (such as the sea), smooth spaces may also arise from striated space (the city, which is the case in point of striation, can witness the rise of nomadic/smooth spaces). Key to the appreciation of the notions of smooth and striated is the idea of process: spaces continuously undergo phases of striation and smoothing. There is no space that is perfectly smooth or striated but rather, certain forms of space (smooth-like or striated-like) that can undergo processes of smoothing and of striation. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) advocate a focus on these situations of smoothing and striation in order to explore how "*the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces*" (1987: 500).

Various researchers have explored the concepts of striated and smooth space in relation to cyberspace (Nunes, 1999), to digital learning spaces (Bayne, 2004) and more specifically in relation to online games (Harper, 2009; Cremin, 2012). These two conceptual devices can prove

particularly insightful when it comes to exploring the different forms of space the players may engage with through their gaming practices. In the case of *League of Angels*, numerous elements within the game provide a grid of action for the players: the members of the community follow a narrative (even though it is important to note that at the difference of other MMORPGs, the narratives are rather latent in *League of Angels* as most of the focus is on the development of the character) as well as a pre-designed way of increasing the character's strength (levelling up regularly, getting new equipment when reaching level 40-50-60-70-80, recruiting stronger heroes, evolving angels, etc.). Each player controls five characters and a 'back-up' character: the main character (who is either a mage, a warrior or an archer), four heroes recruited in the tavern and a back-up hero that replaces a defeated hero during a battle. They all have six pieces of equipment: helmet, mail, greaves, weapon, ring, boots that can be upgraded to different levels depending on the level of the type of equipment (e.g. the equipment available at level 50 can be upgraded to level 50, the same goes for 60, 70 and so on). Despite its prevalence, this grid of action can be ignored as players can increase their strength in many ways that differ from the pre-scribed path or even decide to focus on other aspects aside from strength. On various occasions, I could observe cases of players focusing almost entirely on their main character or playing just two characters (a strong main character along with a strong healer). Furthermore, several players explained that they were mainly focusing on their main character as it was giving them a clear edge when fighting against players who were focusing on all of their characters.

If we return to the example of the chess, we can note that *League of Angels* does present certain of the regulatory and institutionalized elements of the game of chess: events are set at a particular time, there are some obligations to complete quests to reach next level, certain activities become available only once the payer has reached a specific level, etc. However, just as in Go, space is not

fully constrained by these various processes of striation: not only are there numerous ways of engaging with the actual game (some players favour the socializing side of it over the actual gaming strategies for instance) but also of playing one's character. For example, the choice of recruiting one hero rather another might be the manifestation of an aesthetic inclination rather than a strategic move. In that sense, the grid of striation that underlays the design of the game can be challenged by the introduction of new elements/practices that resist the coding power of the process of striation. These new practices resist the coding power of striation in that they enact new lines of development, new possibilities that do not form part of the pre-established logic of the game (i.e. paths that had not been intended by the game developers for instance). In that sense, upon engaging with different playing practices, players can explore smooth-like forms of space, that is to say spaces of action and play that are not yet fully codified for static rules. The grid of striation running through the game is traversed by a variety of possibilities, a countless number of lines of flight that the players can explore, thus challenging the molar organization of the game and propelling themselves the player into a becoming-molecular.

VERNACULAR AND DE-TERRITORIALIZED LANGUAGE

Upon joining an online game, a player may feel overwhelmed by the somehow arcane language used by the other players. As stressed by Crystal (2001), the development of new technologies and ways of interacting has induced linguistic changes[vi]. For instance, some recent literature has highlighted the increasing inclusion of spatial references in online discourse (Mitra and Schwarz, 2006), the development of unconventional spelling in text messaging (Anis, 2007) or creativity in online conversations (North, 2007). These linguistic changes have also been documented in the

game literature; this has included emphasizing the concise (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 2009) and specialized (Mäyrä, 2008) nature of the language used. In the case of the online-game community studied in this paper, I observed the use of a specialized repertoire, occurrences of semantic changes as well as various word-formation patterns (such as initialisms, abbreviations and neologisms) in English. We can note that the study of both English-speaking and French-speaking communities would point towards a greater flexibility of the English language. In the guilds where French was the *lingua franca*, I observed a limited use of abbreviations, a rare tendency to produce neologisms but a considerable amount of borrowings from the English language. Also, while some of the particularisms observed were related specifically to the game studied, others could have been found in other online forms of writing. The table below (Table 1) provides examples of the processes of word-formation and semantic changes encountered during the study of English-speaking communities of *League of Angels.*

	Examples	*Meaning*
Acronyms	lol	Laughing out loud
Abbreviations	ppl atk grats	people attack congrats
Sound symbolism	Me2	Me too
Initialism	**TD** **TA** **BR** **LoA**	Team Dungeon Team Arena Battle Rating League of Angels
Clipping	Def **Inf**	Defence Inferno
Coinages/Neologisms	**Noob,** **newbie** **Clannies**	New and inexperienced player Players in the same clan
Conversion (e.g. changing a noun into a verb)	**To tank**	From the substantive 'tank, refers to a character with a strong defence
Semantic changes	**Blitzing**	Automatic completion of a task

	A party	Several players gathering to complete a quest

Table 1. Examples of word-formation and semantic changes in *League of Angels* (March 2014-March 2015)

These different patterns of word-formation along with the process of semantic changes produce a particular form of language that we can refer to as a vernacular(ised) form of language. In his Tetralinguistic model, Gobard (1976) distinguishes between four types of languages: vehicular, vernacular, referential and mythical. He defines the vernacular language as:

"*the peoples' nobility, the imprescriptible right of ethnic groups, the linguistic birth right, the indelible mark of belonging, the irreversible shibboleth of the proud identity of every linguistic community circumscribed in time and space and benefitting from an isolation from other communities, sufficient enough to keep inferences to a minimum and to preserve its linguistic idiosyncrasy"[vii]* (Gobard, 1976: 34).

Gobard (1976) further agues that the prime function of the vernacular language is not to communicate (*communiquer*) *per se* but rather to be in communion with (*communier*). Gobard's framework is particularly insightful in that it brings about an alternative way of engaging with languages and language contact. Translated to the virtual community studied, this would suggest that the vernacular form of language used by some of the players plays a major role in ensuring a sense of cohesion and unity for the communitiy. On several occasions, misunderstandings occurred between players: this would include cases where players, whose first language was not English, would have difficulties understanding particular strategies or when newcomers (referred to as noobs) would struggle to grasp the language used. When this happened, players would revert back to a more standardized form of English. This confirms the idea that this vernacular form of language is used more as a way of producing and performing an impression of unity and

community that to ensure effective communication. Therefore, in relation to the virtual community associated with *League of Angels*, this vernacularized form of language plays a pivotal role in the development of cohesion: not only does it highlight a shared understanding of certain practices but, in certain ways, it also contributes to enacting boundaries for the community. It clearly sets apart the 'genuine' members of the community who express themselves using this vernacular form of language and the *others* who (by reluctance or lack of experience) do not use this vernacular form of English. We may want to add that even a passive enactment of the language used (i.e. understanding its signification rather than being able to use it) contributes to developing a sense of belonging to the community. A failure to understand the language used might result in the player being excluded from certain activities. This was notably the case with team dungeons (TD): team dungeons normally require three players and involve defeating three opponents (starting from the weakest to the strongest). The time it takes players to defeat these three opponents determines the award the three of them will receive. It was observed that when a player would ask if anybody wanted to go for "TD 65" (Team Dungeon accessible to players whose level is higher than 65), the failure to understand what it referred to led to the more experienced players waiting for other experienced players to be online to go for a team dungeon (rather than going with players who were not understanding what "TD 65" referred to), thus reinforcing the performative (and not given) dimension of membership in an online community.

In that sense, becoming a member of a specific virtual community involves a variety of actions and undertakings and is best approached as a performative process rather than as something given. This directly echoes back to the point made in relation to the spatial organization of the game: membership or native-ness would involve the capacity, on the side of the players, to find new ways of exploring the game by challenging the grid of action (the striation of space) of the game. This

is potentially an interesting point as it clearly sets apart virtual communities and the more traditional forms of community. While traditional communities mostly enact native-ness through birth, it appears as a constant performance within virtual communities. In that sense, native-ness reflects a process of becoming; or put differently there is a process of becoming-native associated with virtual communities. As highlighted by Salem and Zimmerman (2004), "*as a game designer, you can never directly design play. You can only design the rules that give rise to it*" (2004: 168). This highlights the fact that it is both the players and the designers of the game who construct the game culture (Taylor, 2006; Chen, 2009).

There is also a process of becoming in relation to the language itself. Drawing from Gobard's (1976) Tetralinguistic model, Deleuze (1998) defines a vernacularized language as:

"*a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language nor a rediscovered patois, but a becoming-other of language, a minorization of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch's line that escapes the dominant system*" (1998: 5).

While languages can be broken down into structures, patterns and discrete elements, Deleuze's interest lies in the various flows, forces and intensities that underlie any form of speech. The different modifications undergone by the English language along with the various trajectories explored through language brings about an intensive use of the English language. Deleuze and Guattari (1986) argue that intensive, within the context of languages, should be understood as referring to any linguistic element that can express the inner tensions of a language. The language used is no longer standard English, nor is it simply an online form of English: this vernacular form of English is connected to this particular community – the players of *League of Angels* – and it undergoes a process of becoming through which the constant fluctuations and changes that occur

(i.e. the language is not static but in a process of becoming). The language loses its initial territory and starts venturing on new grounds. In many ways, this echoes back to the relation, previously mentioned, between striated and smooth spaces (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Certainly, languages are codified by a variety of official institutions, commissions and conventions (the striated or codified space of the language), but in many ways a language always develops and performs new ways of reinventing itself through flows, new practices and lines of flight (the process of smoothing). Players of *League of Angels* develop a form of language that not only differs from Standard English (through the use of a simplified grammar and of nominal sentences for instance) but also from the more general language of online communities and spaces (as witnessed through the various word-formation and semantic change patterns specific to the virtual community studied, as outlined in Table 1). In that sense, the language employed is specific to the players of *League of Angels* and as argued, an understanding of this language is pivotal to the process of becoming a member of that community. This further involves that there is a dissolution of the cultural codes upon which the English language used by the players of *League of Angels* relies; the language ceases to be representative and becomes nomadic, experimental and ultimately de-territorialized.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to explore the ways in which the notions of belonging and native-ness are expressed and enacted in virtual communities. This has been examined through an emphasis on three dimensions: space, time and language. In order to investigation these questions relating to native-ness and belonging, this article focused on one particular virtual community in the form of

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the players of *League of Angels*. I argue that while the players of *League of Angels* share a temporality, there are also other forms of temporality that became enacted on specific occasions. The space of this virtual community is characterized by a mixture of smooth and striated forms of space: striated spaces code the game and enact specific directions while smooth spaces are spaces of experimentation where members of the community can explore unchartered spaces. Members of this virtual community use a language that presents various patterns of word-formation and semantic changes. This vernacular and de-territorialised form of language plays a major role in relation to the enactment of community as it clearly sets apart those who master this language from the others. Overall, this emphasizes the view of virtual communities as dynamic assemblages.

Altogether, the research conducted on the specific virtual community of the players of *League of Angels* highlights the performative and dynamic dimension of native-ness in virtual communities. In that sense, belonging to a virtual community is not given but consists in a performance that relies on a multitude of factors. Therefore, the notion of belonging is best expressed in terms of becoming rather than being. In the case of *League of Angels*, instead of automatically being a member of the virtual community, players need to engage in various experimental and experiential phases (venturing onto smooth spaces, experiencing new temporalities, etc.) and to enact a vernacular, de-territorialised and de-territorialising language. This implies that not all the players of *League of Angels* form part of the virtual community studied. However, it can be argued that they still play a role in the sense of perhaps enacting more clearly the fact that belonging is a processual and performative undertaking. In that sense, the boundary between members (the natives) and non-members (the others) becomes difficult to draw in practice as native-ness is expressed through performance and is aligned on the process of becoming.

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[i] See (Dicks et al., 2005) on discussion about the use of ethnography in social sciences.

[ii] See Latour (2005) on the distinction between panorama and oligoptica.

[iii] We can note that that the Chinese version of the game was released in June 2013 while the North American version was only released in December 2013.

[iv] In the same line of thought, several have highlighted the interest of combining online methods with participant observation (see Dicks et al., 2006; Murthy, 2008).

[v] Participant observation has been widely praised in the literature on game culture (Taylor 1999; Boellstorff, 2006; Squire and Steinkuehler, 2006).

[vi] A similar point has been made by Shortis (2001).

[vii] Own translation from French.