Terra Nova 2.0—The New World of MMORPGs

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The dominant metaphor used to describe and situate MMORPGs, or massively multiplayer online role playing games (e.g. Ultima Online, EverQuest, World of Warcraft, Second Life, etc.), has been "new world" and "new frontier." By deploying this powerful imagery, game developers, players, the popular media, and academic researchers draw explicit connections between the technology of MMORPGs and the European encounter with the Americas and the western expansion of the United States. Although providing a compelling and often recognizable explanation of the innovations and opportunities of this new technology, the use of this terminology comes with a considerable price, one that had been demonstrated and examined by scholars of the Internet, cyberspace, and virtual reality over a decade ago. This essay explores the impact and significance of the terms "new world" and "frontier" as they have been deployed to explain and describe MMORPGs.

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MMORPG is not only difficult to pronounce but identifies a technology that is perhaps even more difficult to define. And expanding the acronym, massively multiplayer online role playing game, does not necessarily provide much help. Although these things are routinely called "games," research has demonstrated that they are much more than fun and games. As Edward Castronova (2001) pointed out in his seminal paper "Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier," a MMORPG, like Sony Online Entertainment's

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EverQuest, constitutes a "new world" or "frontier" that is, at least in terms of its social structure and economy, a very real and viable alternative to the terrestrial world we currently inhabit.

This conceptualization of the MMORPG as a kind of *terra nova*, is not something that is unique to Castronova's essay; it is evident in much of the current popular, scholarly, and technical literature on the subject. It appears, for example, in the work of Wagner James Au (2007), the official embedded journalist of Linden Lab's *Second Life*. Au, who reports on in-world events and activities, publishes his stories on a blog he calls *New World Notes*, many of which have been collected in the book, *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World* (2008). Likewise the terms "new world" and "frontier" have been employed by "real world" journalists in articles covering MMORPGs, like the *Guardian's* "Braving a new 'world'" (Pauli, 2006), *IT Times's* "Is Second Life a brave new world?" (Tebbutt, 2007), *The Stanford Daily's* "A whole new 'World'" (Ford, 2004), *Frankfurter Allgemeine's* "World of Warcraft: Die Neue Welt" (Rosenfelder, 2007), and *Mother Jones's* "Even Better Than the Real Thing: Sweatshop Gamers, Virtual Terrorists, Avatar Porn, and Other Tales from the Digital Frontier" (Gilson, 2007). They are also evident in recent scholarly literature with T. L. Taylor's (2006) *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, the first chapter of which is titled "Finding New Worlds," Cory Ondrejka's (2006) "Finding Common Ground in New Worlds," and Rich Vogel's (2007) "Utlima Online—The Last Great Frontier." The terms are also frequently employed in MMORPG titles, e.g. *Atlantis III: Le Nouveau Monde* and *Frontier 1895*, and in entries and comments posted on gaming blogs, e.g. Greg Lastowka's (2003) "New Worlds/Old World" posted on the aptly named weblog *Terra Nova*, Ninemoon Family's (2007) "Granado Espada: Dispatches from the New World," and Duckling Kwak's (2007) comment on the *Second Life* blog, "SL is a new frontier; by definition, we are all pioneers." We could go on.

If all of this sounds vaguely familiar, there is a good reason for it. It turns out the same discursive maneuvers accompanied the introduction of cyberspace and first generation network applications—chat rooms, LISTSERV, MUDs/MOOs, USENET, BBS, email, and the World Wide Web. As David Gunkel (2001) describes it:

> immediately after its introduction in 1984, cyberspace was proclaimed the "electronic frontier" and a "new world." Terminology like this currently saturates the technical, theoretical, and popular understandings of cyberspace. From the "console cowboys" of Gibson's *Neuromancer* to the exciting "new worlds" announced by John Walker of AutoDesk and from the pioneering work of Ivan Sutherland and Tom Furness to John Perry Barlow and Mitch Kapor's Electronic Frontier Foundation, the spirit of frontierism has infused the rhetoric and logic of cyberspace. (p. 14)

The examination and critique of this "new world rhetoric" was initiated over a decade ago with Chris Chesher's "Colonizing Virtual Reality" (1993), Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins's "Nintendo® and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue" (1995), Ziauddin Sardar's "alt.civilization.faq: Cyberspace as the Darker Side of the West" (1996), and our own "Virtual Geographies: The New Worlds of Cyberspace" (Gunkel and Gunkel, 1997). These publications tracked, investigated, and critiqued the seemingly innocent circulation of this discursive material, demonstrating that the deployment of phrases like "new world" and "electronic frontier" come with a considerable price, one that has potentially devastating consequences. Now this terminology returns and, judging from its popularity, seems to be deployed with little hesitation or even acknowledgement of the critical investigations that were introduced over a decade ago.

So what if anything has changed? Or is there something about this particular technology that makes it different this time around, that allows us to redeploy the rhetoric and logic of *terra nova* without its attendant problems and complications? The following investigates these questions and is divided into three sections. The first considers the terms "new world" and "frontier" as they have been employed to explain and describe MMORPGs and their significance. The second critiques the use of this terminology by investigating three related aspects—the forgetting of history that is part and parcel of both technological innovation and new world adventures, the ethnocentrism implicated in and perpetrated by new world exploration and frontier settlement, and the unfortunate consequences these particular actions have for others. The third and final section examines the effect this critique has on our understanding of the MMORPG and its current and future research.

New World Redux

The term "new world" refers to and designates the European encounter with the continents of North and South America, which began with Christopher Columbus's initial Caribbean landfall in 1492. Although the exact origin of the phrase is still disputed by historians, it is widely recognized that it was initially popularized in Europe by way of a 1502/03 document attributed to Amerigo Vespucci and titled *Mundus Novus* (Luzzana, 1992; Zamora, 1993). Ten years later, the Latin form, *Terra Nova*, appeared as the official title applied to the Americas on Martin Waldseemüller's influential 1513 world map, *Carta marina* (Johnson, 2006). In the European imagination, this "new world" was understood as an alternative to the "old world." It was situated on the other side of the globe, populated with unfamiliar fauna and flora, and inhabited by other, unknown peoples. As Kirkpatrick Sale (2006) points out, "whatever Europe understood

the New World to be—and it was many things, not all clearly assimilated yet—it was a *new* world, another half of the globe not known before, plainly different from Europe and even the Orient, rich and large and mysterious, a place of new peoples, new vistas, new treasures, new species" (p. 234). "New world," then, names not only a specific geographical location but, perhaps more importantly, designates a powerful and seductive idea, that of a different and uncharted territory open to and available for European exploration, exploitation, and eventual settlement.

"Frontier" has a similar lineage. Instead of naming the European encounter with the Atlantic coast of the Americas, however, it identified the western movement of white European settlers across the North American continent. Although the word had been used at the time of this migration to identify the receding boundary of the American West, the idea of the frontier was largely a retroactive construct. "The frontier was," as Ziauddin Sardar (1996) reminds us, "an invented concept which recapitulated an experience that had already past" (p. 18). In fact, the concept of the American "frontier," which is attributed to the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, was introduced and theorized only after the announcement of its closure by the US Census Bureau in 1890. Turner formulated what came to be known as the "frontier hypothesis" (Billington, 1965) in a paper that was read at the ninth annual meeting of the American Historical Association, which was convened in Chicago at the same time as the World Columbian Exhibition's celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. "Up to our own day," Turner (1894) writes, "American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (p. 199). Conceptualized in this way, the frontier was not just an arbitrary boundary situated some where west of the Mississippi river; it designated a particular understanding of American history, one which, according to Turner, was directly influenced and informed by the Columbian voyages. "Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity, and the people of the United States have taken their tone from the incessant expansion which has not only been open but has even been forced upon them" (p. 227). According to Turner's hypothesis, then, the frontier was understood as more than a geophysical boundary. It constituted something of a national ideology, one which not only narrated the growth and development of the young nation as it expanded westward but explained the formation of a distinct national character—what some have called the "pioneering spirit."

Because the terms "new world" and "frontier" were already more than mere geophysical markers, they were easily applied beyond their original context and scope. As Ray Allen Billington (1965) points out in his reconsideration of Turner's hypothesis, "modern technology has created a whole host of new 'frontiers'" (p. 41). In 1901, for example, Charles Horton Cooley, the progenitor of the sociology of communication, employed the term "new world" to explain the social effects of telecommunications technology. "We understand," Cooley (1962) writes, "nothing rightly unless we perceive the manner in which the revolution in communication has made a new world for us" (p. 65). Echoes of this "new world metaphor," as Gunkel (2001) and Fuller and Jenkins (1995) call it, can also be detected in the early writings addressing cyberspace and the Internet. Cyber-enthusiasts like John Perry Barlow (1990 and 1994) and Timothy Leary (1999), for instance, often mobilized the figure of Columbus and his discovery of the new world as a way to characterize the impact and importance of information and communication technology (ICT). And this "impact" is, at this early stage, characterized as overwhelmingly positive and full of wild optimism. As Nicole Stenger (1992) describes it, "cyberspace, though born of a war technology, opens up a space for collective restoration, and for peace. As screens are dissolving, our future can only take on a luminous dimension! Welcome to the New World" (p. 58).

"Frontier" is employed in a similar fashion. In 1996, for example, the conservative think tank The Progress and Freedom Foundation published a white paper that drew explicit connections between the Columbian voyages, the expansion of the American frontier, and the new opportunities introduced by ICTs: "The bioelectric *frontier* is an appropriate metaphor for what is happening in cyberspace, calling to mind as it does the spirit of invention and discovery that led ancient mariners to explore the world, generations of pioneers to tame the American continent, and, more recently, to man's first explorations of outer space" (Dyson, et al., p. 297). Similar comparisons can be found in both the name and rhetoric of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which was founded by Mitch Kapor and John Perry Barlow in 1990 to protect the rights of the new cyber-pioneers and homesteaders, Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993), and Jeffrey Cooper's "The CyberFrontier and America at the Turn of the 21st Century: Reopening Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier" (2000). As its title indicates, Cooper not only leverages Turner's "frontier hypothesis" but characterizes cyberspace as reopening the American West. Although he makes brief mention of some of the "costs that settlement imposed in degradation of environment, near-extinction of species and habitat, and displacement of the indigenous populations," Cooper, like most cyber-enthusiasts, provides a rather sanitized and sanguine image: "I suggest that this new

cyberfrontier is playing the same role as did 'the West' earlier in American history and, moreover, that it will engender many of the same types of impacts on the nation as a whole" (p. 4).

In the discourse of ICT, however, "new world" and "frontier" have always been more than metaphors. This is especially apparent in the considerations of virtual reality technology and computer gaming. "In the rhetoric of the virtual realists," Benjamin Woolley (1992) writes, "this 'nonspace' was not simply a mathematical space nor a fictional metaphor but a new frontier, a very real one that was open to exploration and, ultimately, settlement" (p. 122). According to Woolley, the virtual environments created in the non-space of cyberspace are not to be understood as something like a new frontier; they are, quite literally, a new world—a very real space (albeit one which is entirely virtual) that is open to exploration and colonization. This particular understanding of cyberspace as an another spatial dimension is firmly rooted in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the proto-cyberpunk novel that introduced the neologism, and Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992), which describes something he called "Metaverse," a network accessed, immersive virtual reality environment occupied by and experienced through user controlled avatars. The concept is also evident in video and computer gaming. Although Fuller and Jenkins (1995) trace discursive connections between new world travel writing and the narrative structures of computer gaming, Ziauddin Sardar (1996) finds a more fundamental connection between the two.

> Many computer games, like "Super Mario Brothers," "Civilization," "Death Gate," "Merchant Colony," and "Big Red Adventure" are little more than updated versions of the great European voyages of discovery. These are not games but worlds, constructed Western Utopias, where all history can be revised and rewritten, all non-Western people forgotten, in the whirl of the spectacle. (p. 17)

According to Sardar's argument, computer games not only employ the rhetoric of but actually constitute a new world, and as such provide the space for an exercise of what can only be called "colonization." A similar insight is provided by James Newman (2004), who finds "colonization" to be one of the structuring principles of game play.

> Typically, videogames create "worlds," "lands" or "environments" for players to explore, traverse, conquer, and even dynamically manipulate and transform in some cases. As we have noted in the discussion of the typical structuring of the videogame into levels or stages, progress through a particular game is frequently presented to the player as progress through the world of the game…videogames may be seen to offer the equivalent of de Certeau's (1984) spatial stories, with gameworlds presenting sites imbued with narrative potential and in which play is

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at least partly an act of colonization and the enactment of transformations upon the space. (pp. 108-109)

A similar lineage and development is present in the evolution of the role-playing game (RPG). It is, for example, evident in MECC's *The Oregon Trail*. Originally released in 1974, *The Oregon Trail* was an educational computer game based on and designed to teach school children about the American frontier through first-person role playing. In the game, players assumed the role of a wagon leader with the objective of successfully leading a group of pioneers into the western frontier. The idea of the frontier plays a similar role in the development of multiplayer RPGs. It is, for instance, the organizing principle of TSR's *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*). Although a low-tech, tabletop game published in the same year as *The Oregon Trail*, *D&D* introduced the basic concepts and structures that inform the text-based, multiplayer online virtual worlds of MUDs/MOOs and their graphical progeny, the MMORPG. According to Gary Gygax, the inventor of the game, *D&D* plays the role of frontier.

> Our modern world has few, if any, frontiers. We can no longer escape to the frontier of the West, explore the Darkest Africa, sail to the South Seas. Even Alaska and the Amazon Jungles will soon be lost as wild frontier areas…It is therefore scarcely surprising that a game which directly involves participants in a make-believe world of just such a nature should prove popular. (Gygax, 1979, p. 29; quoted in Fine, 1983, p. 55)

Gygax, like Turner (1894), perceived the closing of the geophysical frontier and, like Cooper (2000), situates the RPG as a new frontier—a new world that is open for exploration and adventure.

The MMORPG, which is designed and understood as the most recent iteration of RPG technology (Castronova, 2005, p. 9; Lastowka and Hunter, 2006; Taylor, 2006, p. 21), capitalizes on and deploys all these elements. First, MMORPGs are characterized and defined as "new worlds" and "frontiers." This is apparent not only in the marketing literature of games and their coverage in the popular media but also in critical assessments provided by scholars and researchers. As R. V. Kelly (2004) reports:

> this isn't a game at all, I realized. It's a vast, separate universe with its own rules, constraints, culture, ethos, ethics, economy, politics, and inhabitants. People explore here. They converse. They transact business, form bonds of friendship, swear vows of vengeance, escape from dire circumstances, joke, fight to overcome adversity, and learn here. (p. 9)

For Kelly, MMORPGs are not merely an entertaining past-time. They constitute an independent and fully realized world, one which not only offers escape from the restrictions of the "old world" but provides for new and improved opportunities. Engaging with the world of a MMORPG, therefore, is similar to, if not the same as, embarking on a voyage to the New World or the American frontier. "It's the equivalent," Kelly (2004) writes, "of getting on the boat to come to America or piling into the Conestoga wagon to head out west" (p. 63). In this new world, one not only escapes the limitations and trappings of the old world but can begin a new life. The game, like the new world of the Americas and the frontier of the American West, "offers a chance to completely redefine and reinvent yourself" (Kelly, 2004, p. 63).

A similar characterization is supplied by Castronova (2005), for whom MMORPGs constitute "synthetic worlds" (p. 4), "an alternative Earth" (p. 6), a "new world" (p. 9), or a "frontier" (p. 8). In fact, it is the latter term that, according to Castronova's (2005) judgment, provides "the simplest answer to the question of what synthetic worlds really are" (p. 8). For Castronova, then, MMORPGs are not analogous or comparable to the frontier; they are quite literally a new territory. This particular formulation is emphasized in a footnote concerning *Second Life*. "The synthetic world of *Second Life*," Castronova (2005) writes, "sells server resources to those who want them, and nobody bats an eye when they call it 'land,' for that is what it is. Land. Space. *Lebensraum*. The New World. Terra Nova" (p. 306). The use of the word "land" by Linden Lab is, on Castronova's account, an entirely appropriate characterization and not simply a clever image or metaphor. This is because *Second Life*, like other MMORPGs, constitutes another world, a very real world with very real social and economic opportunities for individuals and communities.[1] This *terra nova*, however, is not located somewhere across the Atlantic or on the other side of the Mississippi; it is situated in a computer-generated environment accessed over the Internet. And as with the New World of the Americas and the western frontier of the United States, people have begun migrating to this new land, settling on the frontier, and colonizing this vast, new territory. "Statistics reported in this book," Castronova (2005) writes:

> will suggest that many people are diving into the new worlds right now, with enthusiasm. Evidently, they find the physical environments crafted by computer game designers much more attractive than Earth. Accordingly, these travelers or colonists have come to maintain a large fraction of their social, economic, and political lives there. (p. 9)

Second, understood in this way, MMORPGs participate in the ideology and rhetoric of the European "age of discovery" and American expansionism. This includes, among other things, concepts of individual freedom and egalitarianism that inevitably pull in the direction of utopianism. New worlds, no matter their location or configuration, have always been situated as an alternative to and an improvement over the old world. "During the Renaissance," Carlos Fuentes (1999) writes, "the discovery of America meant, as we have seen, that Europe had found a place for Utopia. Again and again, when the explorers set foot in the new world, they believed that they had regained paradise" (p. 195). And the virtual environments created by various forms of ICT turn out to be the perfect place for relocating and recoding this utopian fantasy. "You might think," Kevin Robins (1995) explains, "of cyberspace as a utopian vision for postmodern times. Utopia is nowhere (*outopia*) and, at the same time, it is also somewhere good (*eutopia*). Cyberspace is projected as the same kind of 'nowhere-somewhere'" (p. 135). Despite the fact that both Gibson's and Stephenson's cyberpunk science fiction present distinctly dystopian visions, the first generation of writings on and about cyberspace were unapologetically idealistic and utopian (Sardar, 1996; Gunkel and Gunkel, 1997). This utopian strain, as Gunkel (2001) has pointed out, is not something that is limited to recent innovations in ICT but is part and parcel of virtually every innovation in communication technology (p. 43). Electric telegraphy, for example, was powered by an ideology that deployed the rhetoric of and made explicit connections to Christian eschatology (Carey, 1989, p. 17). Radio had been, at least during the first decades of its dissemination, promoted as a kind of *deus ex machina* that would repair the deep wounds of industrialized modernity (Spinelli, 1996). Television, as Marshall McLuhan (1995) famously argued, abolished the physical limitations of terrestrial distance, reducing the effective size of the planet to a "global village" (p. 5). And the Internet, as Julian Dibbell (2006) describes it, was supposed to have created a "commerical utopia"—"a realm of atomless digital products traded in frictionless digital environments for paperless digital cash" (p. 23). The new worlds of MMORPGs are no exception—utopian ideas and rhetoric saturate the contemporary discussions, marketing campaigns, and debates. *Second Life*, for example, is routinely described in terms that evoke such optimism. "Our goal with *Second Life*," Philip Rosedale, the founder and CEO of Linden Lab, has stated, "is to make it better than real life in a lot of ways" (CBS News, 2006). Even in those circumstances where the assessment is more measured, utopianism is still the operative category. Grey Drane (2007), for instance, is not ready to call *Second Life* utopia, but he still finds it involved with utopian ideas. "OK, I'm not suggesting that utopia can be achieved in *Second Life*, but it might be the kind of environment in which you could play around with what the word 'utopia' might actually mean" (p. 1).

This utopianism, however, is not something that is limited to the world of *Second Life* or the popular hype that currently surrounds it. The same is true with other games and their critical assessment. Kelly (2004), for instance, argues that MMORPGs offer alterative worlds that are not just different from but "better than the real world" (p. 9). And in justifying this statement, he mobilizes a frontier mythology that is distinctly American. "A MMORPG, after all, is a completely separate and egalitarian world where energy and resolve determine your fate and where appearance, age, connections, and socioeconomic advantage are all meaningless. In a MMORPG it doesn't matter how young and pretty you are, how svelte you are, what color your skin is, how much money you were born into, how well you did on your SATs, or who you know. The only thing standing between you and success is you" (p. 63). For Kelly, the MMORPG fulfills all the promises of the techno-libertarian idea of utopia—a new world where the limitations of old world traditions and institutions do not matter, and a man (because the rhetoric of this ideology is always masculine) can determine his own life, his own opportunities, and his own success. A similar argument is supplied by Castronova. In his initial paper on the subject of MMORPGs, Castronova (2001) explains the growing popularity of these virtual worlds (VWs) by mobilizing the same mythos: "Unlike Earth, in VWs there is real equality of opportunity, as everybody is born penniless and with the same minimal effectiveness. In a VW, people choose their own abilities, gender, and skin tone instead of having them imposed by accidents of birth. Those who cannot run on Earth can run in a VW. On Earth, reputation sticks to a person; in VWs, an avatar with a bad reputation can be replaced by one who is clean" (p. 15). According to Castronova, the virtual world of a MMORPG provides users with an equal opportunity world, where they are effectively liberated from the inherent baggage of and unfortunate restrictions imposed by terrestrial existence. This is again a reason to be optimistic. "Looking beyond these simple joys of immersive, interactive entertainment, however, it should be stressed that synthetic worlds may eventually make contributions to human well-being that will be judged as extraordinarily significant" (Castronova, 2005, p. 25). In the final analysis, Castronova (2005) goes so far as to risk venturing the "outrageous claim" that "synthetic worlds may save humanity" (p. 278). And if they do not actually achieve what we currently understand by "utopia," they do at least provide the best chance to explore and examine its possibilities. "It may well be the case," Castronova (2005) writes:

> that no one spends time in worlds constructed as they 'ought' to be; if we build Utopia and no one comes, we need to get serious about revising our notions of Utopia. The point here is that Utopian concepts need to be part of our strategy in making use of this technology. Let's build places that we truly believe are the

best possible places to be. The very act of building them is a discussion about
the future of humankind. (p. 262)

Third, because MMORPGs are understood as new worlds, researchers situate themselves in the position of explorers and their accounts often read like a travel journal, a frontier chronicle, or Columbus's *Diario*—those writings that Fuller and Jenkins (1995) call "new world travel writing." Frank Schaap (2002), for instance, describes his ethnographic investigation of MUDs and MOOs in terms that evoke new world travels: "The journey is not just about getting to know a strange land and understanding the Other and his culture, it is also, and maybe more importantly, a way to better understand the Self, one's own country and culture" (p. 1). Like Columbus and several generations of European explorers to the new world, Schaap characterizes his research as a voyage to another world, where he confronts the Other and returns home with a new understanding of self and country.[2] A similar approach is evident in Kelly's *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*. Kelly (2004) begins his examination with a first-person account of his own adventures in the new world of a MMORPG, and, like many new world adventure tales, he narrates how he is lost and on the verge of death, if not already dead. "Somewhere in the middle of the virtual forest my corpse is rotting away. Its flesh will decay overnight if I don't discover its final resting place, and I'll lose the trinkets that are stored on the cadaver—serious trinkets, important trinkets" (p. 1). And Castronova does something similar. In the "Virtual Worlds" article from 2001, he not only includes entries from his journal but explicitly identifies his own research efforts with that of a new world explorer.

In the past, the discovery of new worlds has often been an epochal event for both the new world and the old. The new world typically has a herald, a hapless explorer who has gotten lost and has wandered aimlessly about in strange territory, but has had the wit and good fortune to write down what he has seen, his impressions of the people, and the exciting dangers he has faced, for an audience far away. In similar fashion, I stumbled haplessly into Norrath in April 2001, and then spent four months wandering around there. It took me about six weeks to get my bearings. I began recording data in May. And I assure you, I faced many dangers, and died many, many times, in order to gather impressions and bring them back for you (p. 4).

In providing this reflection, Castronova explicitly characterizes his own research efforts in terms that evoke the heroic adventures of the "great" European explorers—Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Walter Raleigh, etc. MMORPGs, like *EverQuest*, are new, new worlds and, because of this, the researcher plays the role of the hapless explorer who ventures into the

unknown, faces unprecedented dangers, and returns home with fantastic tales of exotic peoples, strange lands, and exciting opportunities.

The Darker Side of the West

Characterizing MMORPGs as a new world or frontier seems innocent enough. In fact, these terms are not without a certain amount of discursive utility, as is immediately evident from their seemingly unrestrained proliferation in the popular press, technical literature, marketing campaigns, scholarly investigations, blogs, etc. By describing MMORPGs in this fashion, one connects this "practical virtual reality" technology, as Castronova (2005, p. 3) calls it, to the history and legacy of European exploration and the westward expansion of the United States, two epoch-defining events that are noteworthy for their socio-political innovations, economic opportunities, and celebrated adventures. At the same time, however, neither term is without considerable controversy and criticism. Although the concept of the "new world" remained relatively unchallenged for several centuries, it gets submitted to significant re-evaluation in the later-half of the twentieth century. As the quincentennial of Columbus's first American landfall approached, scholars and educators, especially in the Americas, engaged in a wholesale reassessment of the Columbian legacy (Brandon, 1986; Fuentes, 1999; Pagden, 1993; Zamora, 1993). The most polemic of these criticisms ventured a fundamentally revised image of the Admiral and subsequent European explorers/colonizers, one in which these events were interpreted not as heroic acts of discovery but as the first steps in what became a violent invasion, bloody conquest, and unfortunate genocide. "The New World," as Carlos Fuentes (1999) argues, "became a nightmare as colonial power spread and its native peoples became the victim of colonialism, deprived of their ancient faith and their ancient lands and forced to accept a new civilization and a new religion. The Renaissance dream of a Christian Utopia in the New World was also destroyed by the harsh realities of colonialism: plunder, enslavement, genocide" (p. 195). Similar criticisms were leveled against the image of the American frontier. Shortly after Turner's death in 1932, a new generation of historians took issue with his "frontier hypothesis," finding, among other things, questionable forms of provincialism, determinism, and ethnocentrism (Billington, 1965, p. 2). Despite these critical insights, however, MMORPG developers, players, and researchers deploy the terms "new world" and "frontier" with little or no evidence of hesitation or critical self-reflection, leaving one to reissue a query initially proposed by Fuller and Jenkins (1995) over a decade ago: "One has to wonder why these heroic metaphors of discovery have been adopted by popularizers of new technologies just as these metaphors are

undergoing sustained critique in other areas of culture, a critique that hardly anyone can be unaware of in the year after the quincentennial of Columbus's first American landfall" (p. 59).

This lack of consideration is evident, for example, in Kelly's research and the experiences of the gamers he interviewed. "Many of the players I spoke with," Kelly (2004) writes, "mentioned that they owned reprints of the diaries of Christopher Columbus, the ship's logs of Captain Cook, the journals of Lewis and Clark, the travelogues of Marco Polo, or the histories of Magellan, Ibn Battuta, or Zhang He. They were fascinated with exploration. And MMORPG games were the closest they could come to discovering new continents on their own" (p. 72). In reporting this data, Kelly explicitly recognizes a connection between the history and literature of exploration and the experience of MMORPG game play. MMORPGs, on this account, simulate new worlds or uncharted territory, offering players the opportunity to experience the thrill and adventure of discovery. At the same time, however, Kelly's account provides no acknowledgement of the profoundly complicated history that is part and parcel of the age of discovery and that is both recounted and recorded in this literature. This rather selective and arguably superficial reading of history is, however, not without justification. If MMORPG developers, players, and researchers do not explicitly account for the problems and complications that have become historically sedimented in the terms "new world" and "frontier," it is because both computer technology and the concepts of the new world and frontier are presumed to be liberated from the burden of history.

Computer technology has often been characterized as radically ahistorical. "New technologies are," Simon Penny (1994) argues, "often heralded by a rhetoric that locates them as futuristic, without history, or at best arising from a scientific-technical lineage quite separate from cultural history" (p. 231). New technology and ICT in particular is often characterized as radically distinct and different from anything that came before, providing for a significant break with tradition that facilitates an easy escape from both cultural context and history. Even though technology is always the product of a specific culture and introduced at a particular time for a particular purpose, the futuristic rhetoric that surrounds technical innovation allows for this context to be set aside, ignored, or simply forgotten. As Ken Hillis (1999) summarizes it, "cyberspace and VR are, respectively, a frontier metaphor and a technology offering both the promise of an escape from history with a capital H, and the encrusted meanings it contains, and an imaginary space whereby to perform, and thereby possibly exorcise or master, difficult real-world historical and material situations" (p. xvii). This tendency to escape from or exorcise history is also one of the integral components of the myth of the new world and the American frontier. "The imagination of Americans after 1800," David Noble (1964) argues:

was dominated by the belief that the American West represented a redemptive nature which would provide spiritual salvation for the men who settled upon it. European man, corrupted by civilization, was reborn, made innocent, when he abandoned old world history for new world nature. (p. 419)

The new world of the Americas was situated and idealized as a place where Europeans could forget the problems and complications of the old world, exit the burdens imposed upon them by history, and begin anew. Consequently, what allows MMORPG players, developers, and researchers to set aside the complex histories associated with the new world and frontier is the fact that these terms already deploy, validate, and justify a forgetting of history. If the new world was where Europeans came to forget their past and begin anew, MMOPRGs appear to be where one now goes to forget the unfortunate history and legacy of this forgetting.

Although the "darker side" of this history appears to have been effectively suppressed by those involved with MMORPGs, their descriptions and characterizations are nevertheless ethnocentric. And to make matters worse, this ethnocentrism is itself a byproduct of the forgetting of history. The concepts of "new world" and "frontier" are not semantically empty or neutral. They have been derived from and are rooted in a distinctly white, European understanding and experience.[3] They are, therefore, already involved in a particular set of assumptions and values that are culturally specific and by no means universally accepted or applicable. The characterization of the new world and the frontier as vast open territories, ripe with new economic opportunities to be exploited, and providing the perfect location for potentially utopian communities is a fantasy that is unique to Renaissance Europe and the relatively new nation of the United States. Other populations do not share these values and assumptions nor do they experience frontiers and movement into and through the frontier in the same way. The native peoples of South and North America, for instance, account for the so-called "age of discovery" and the settling of the American West with an entirely different and much less optimistic understanding. This is particularly evident in critical reassessments of the dominant historical narratives as provided by scholars Tzvetan Todorov (1984), Berry Lopez (1992), and Carlos Fuentez (1999), and performance-artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (Fusco, 1995); and efforts to write alternative histories like those introduced by historians Jonathan Hill (1988), Alvin Josephy (1993), and Francis Jennings (1994). Deploying the grand narratives of exploration, colonization, and settlement as if they were somehow beyond reproach and universally applicable has the effect of normalizing a particular culture's experiences and asserting them over and against that of all others. This is not only presumptuous, it is, as Gunkel (2001) points out, the ethnocentric gesture par excellence—one assumes that his/her experience

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is normative, elevates it to the position of a universal, and imposes it upon others (p. 34). In using the terms "new world" and "frontier," MMORPG developers, players, and researchers, impose a distinctly Euro-American understanding, colonizing both the idea and the technology of the MMORPG.[4]

This kind of implicit ethnocentrism can, for instance, be found in Castronova's account of migration. Although "migration" sounds considerably less disturbing than "colonization," its formulation is nevertheless dependent upon and informed by ethnocentric bias. Writing in 1998, Michael Vlahos describes the initial migration of people to the "infosphere," another name for the then nascent cyberspaces created and sustained by computer networks, like the Internet (p. 498). "Human migration to the Infosphere," Vlahos (1998) explains:

> represents an historical shift on several levels of significance. It is a true *transhumance*—a movement of human society to a new place, much like the colonizing of the New World, while still connected to the old. It is thus a migration away from, as well as toward, the in situ and material patterns of all human relationships to something very different and more complex. This entails a migration from long familiar patterns of culture. Human culture has always adapted to fit new environments, and the change is often as difficult as it is exhilarating. (p. 500)

Castronova provides a similar account, when he describes the current migration to MMORPGs as involving a movement of people justified and explained by the promise of better opportunities and experiences. "However we refer to these territories," Castronova (2005) writes

> the most general causes and effects of any migration into them may not be hard to predict. Human migration is a well-known and fairly well-studied phenomenon. A simplified economic story would say that those doing relative less well in one place face the risks of change and head off to a new place. They stake claims there but retain ties with their former neighbors. If they do well, they stay; if they don't they go back…While this is a happy story in the long run, nonetheless, it is also a story of great change and short-run stress. (p. 11)

This account of a potentially significant migration to MMORPG cyberspace, despite what might appear to be a neutral stance, is unfortunately biased and ethnocentric. It privileges the interests and fate of the migrating population, emphasizing their new opportunities, their hardships and stresses, and their connections to the old world they leave behind. What such an account conveniently leaves out is consideration of the effect this mobility has on the indigenous peoples who were historically the unfortunate victims of such movement. Consider, for example,

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the narrative structure usually employed in the mythology of the American West. The standard story, one told in countless Hollywood westerns, goes like this:

> At one time a group of brave pioneers left the comforts of home and hearth. They embarked on a long and dangerous journey to a new land west of the Mississippi river. They endured many hardships and had to deal with all kinds of stress. But eventually, through their own hard work and ingenuity, they were successful in domesticating this wild and uncharted territory.

This is, no doubt, a good story, and it makes for some compelling and enduring drama. Unfortunately it also effectively excludes consideration of those indigenous peoples that Columbus had originally misidentified as "Indians." Or if there is some consideration, these *others* are more often than not reduced to one more challenging hardship that needs to be endured and eliminated—what is often called quite pejoratively "those pesky Indians." In organizing the explanation so that it is told from the perspective of the migrating population, those individuals who Castronova calls "travelers" or "colonists," one participates in and perpetuates ethnocentrism.[5]

Stating this, however, appears to ignore the fact that MMORPGs, like other forms of computer-generated cyberspace, are not inhabited by an indigenous population who would be subject to displacement, enslavement, and colonization. What makes the new, new worlds of the MMORPG different, is that this time around there do not appear to be victims. "I would speculate," Mary Fuller writes:

> that part of the drive behind the rhetoric of virtual reality as a New World or new frontier is the desire to recreate the Renaissance encounter with America without guilt: this time, if there are others present, they really won't be human (in the case of Nintendo characters), or if they are, they will be other players like ourselves, whose bodies are not jeopardized by the virtual weapons we wield. (Fuller and Jenkins, 1995, p. 59)

Understood in this way, computer technology simulates new territories to explore, to conquer, and to settle without the principal problem that has come to be associated with either the European conquest of the Americas or the westward expansion of the United States. Unlike the continents of North and South America, these new worlds are not previously inhabited. "Plenty of humans," Castronova (2007) points out, "lived in the allegedly New World happened upon by Christopher Columbus. Not so with new virtual worlds. On the day of launch, these are truly newly created terrains that no human has yet explored" (p. 63). MMORPGs, then, reengineer or reprogram the concept of the new world, retaining all the heroic aspects of exploration and

discovery while stripping away the problems that have historically complicated the picture. As Gunkel (2001) explains it:

> the *terra nova* of cyberspace is assumed to be disengaged from and unencumbered by the legacy of European colonialism, because cyberspace is determined to be innocent and guiltless. What distinguishes and differentiates the utopian dreams of cyberspace from that of the new world is that cyberspace, unlike the Americas, is assumed to be victimless. (p. 44)

The new worlds of cyberspace are not occupied by others; they are effectively open and empty. They are, therefore, available for frictionless and guilt-free exploration and settlement. Understood in this way, movement into and through MMORPGs is a matter of individual choice, and the decision is ultimately based on what appears to be best for the user. As Castronova (2005) describes it, "those who do well by moving, move; those who do well by staying, stay; and everyone eventually finds the best possible place to be" (p. 11). Although this sounds good, it is insensitive to the very real conditions of others. "Cyberspace," as Sardar (1996) reminds us, "does have real victims" (p. 19). These victims are not situated within the space of the MMORPG world but are those others who cannot, for numerous reasons, participate. Although the encounter with MMORPGs offers "everyone," as Castronova claims, the opportunity to find "the best possible place to be," there are others, the majority of humanity in fact, who do not have a choice in the matter. That is, the place where they find themselves is not something that they actively select or have the ability to change. The decision to migrate to a MMORPG or not, which is often presented as if it were simply a matter of personal preference, is a privilege that only a small percentage of the world's people get to consider. As Olu Oguibe (1995) describes it

> Despite our enthusiastic efforts to redefine reality, to push the frontiers of experience and existence to the very limits, to overcome our own corporeality, to institute a brave new world of connectivities and digital communities, nature and its structures and demands still constitute the concrete contours of reality for the majority of humanity. (p. 3)

Access to computer technology and the opportunity to experience the new worlds and open vistas of a MMORPG is something that is only available to a small fraction of the world's population. The majority of humanity, as Oguibe points out, does not have the luxury to question or contemplate the issue. Consequently these statements about migration and individual choice can only be made from a position of relative privilege that remains effectively blind to the fact that others—most others—do not have the option to participate in such a discussion. "Although this

virtual exclusion," as Gunkel (2001) calls it, "is admittedly bloodless and seemingly sanitized of the stigma of colonial conquest, it is no less problematic or hegemonic" (p. 45). For the victims of colonial conquest, then, the MMORPG presents something of a double whammy. Not only do the events of new world conquest and frontier settlement conjure up less than pleasant memories for indigenous and aboriginal peoples, but many of these populations are currently situated on the "information have-nots" side of the digital divide. To put it in rather blunt terms, the message is this:

> Listen, we understand that what we thought to be a new world and frontier didn't go so well for you folks, and we really regret that whole genocide thing. That was clearly a mistake. But we can just forget about all that. This time we're going to get it right. Because this time we have excluded you people from the very beginning.

Conclusions

When the history of the 21ˢᵗ century comes to be written, it is possible that the first decade of the new millennium will be remembered alongside the years 1492, the year of Columbus's discovery of the New World, and 1894, the year Frederick Jackson Turner introduced the frontier hypothesis. This is because the 2000's are already being promoted as the decade in which new worlds were discovered and a brand new frontier was first opened to migration, exploitation, and settlement. Although this account sounds promising, it has, as we have seen, a number of important consequences. First, using the terms "new world" and "frontier" to characterize MMORPGs clearly have a way of articulating what is really interesting and compelling about this technology. In fact, by using this terminology, one can immediately and intuitively perceive why so many developers, players, and academics understand MMORPGs as much more than fun and games. When described in terms of "new worlds" or "new frontiers," MMORPGs are framed, to use George Lakoff's (2002) word, as vast new territories that are open to exploration, settlement, and exploitation. As Barlow described it back in 1990, "Columbus was probably the last person to behold so much usable and unclaimed real estate (unreal estate)" (p. 37). Understood in this way, MMORPGs are not just another network application or a new form of entertainment but are, as Castronova (2005), Taylor (2006), Kelly (2004) and many others argue, an important socio-cultural development that needs to be taken seriously. These synthetic new worlds, like the New World of the Americas and the frontier of the American West, offer new economic and social opportunities, provide a location for innovative and unheard of adventures, and even support grand utopian experiments and new forms of community. This is

understandably hard to resist, and it is difficult to fault the players, developers, and scholars who leverage this powerful rhetoric and historical precedent. At the same time, however, "new world" and "frontier" have what Sardar calls a "darker side," specifically the forgetting of history, the imposition of colonial power and the exercise of ethnocentrism, and the unfortunate exclusion of others. Colonization, violent conquest, and bloody genocide necessarily haunt the use of this terminology and mitigate against its effectiveness and significance. To make matters worse, the current publications, marketing literature, and academic studies surrounding MMORPGs willfully ignore, unconsciously suppress, or conveniently forget these important complications. And they do so despite the fact that a good number of articles and books were published on this exact subject over a decade ago. Consequently, the current crop of texts addressing and promoting MMORPGs not only perform a highly selective and arguably uninformed reading of history but participate in and even perpetrate the very problems they exclude and leave unarticulated.

Second, words matter. When all is said and done, the problems we have identified have to do with language. That is, the critical issue concerns not MMORPGs per se but the words that have, for better or worse, been selected by game developers, promoters, players, and academics to describe, characterize, and frame MMORPGs in contemporary discussions, marketing campaigns, and debates. The problem, then, is not with MMORPGs in general or any particular MMORPG but with the use and circulation of the terms "new world" and "new frontier." These words, however, are not immaterial. As Gunkel (2001) explains, "the words that are employed to describe a technological innovation are never mere reports of the state-of-the-art but constitute sites for the production and struggle over significance" (p. 50). Consequently, what MMORPGs are and, perhaps more importantly, what we understand MMORPGs to be, is as much a result of computer programming and game design practices as it is a product of the discursive decisions made by game developers, marketing firms, journalists, gamers, scholars, educators, bloggers, etc. Addressing this difficulty, however, is not simply a matter of finding a better and less controversial terminology. Whether we call MMORPGs new worlds, new frontiers, games, parallel universes, synthetic worlds, or something else we inevitably inherit etymological baggage that we do not necessarily control or even fully comprehend. The goal, then, is not to identify some pure linguistic signifiers that would be unaffected by these complications and issues. Language, any language, is already shaped by the sediment of its own culture and history. This is simultaneously the source of its explanatory power and a significant liability. The best we can do is to remain critically aware of this fact and to understand how the very words we employ to describe technology already shape, influence, and construct what it is we think we are

merely describing. This is, as James Carey (1992) explains it, the "dual capacity of symbolic forms: as 'symbols of' they present reality; as 'symbols for' they create the very reality they present" (p. 29). Consequently, the critical issue is to learn to deploy language self-reflectively, knowing how the very words we use to characterize a technological innovation are themselves part of an on-going struggle over the way we understand the technology and frame its significance.

Third, there is a way that all of this bends around and facilitates opportunities for critical self-reflection on the current state of game studies. In the inaugural issue of *Game Studies*, for example, Espen Aarseth (2001) argued in favor of a distinct academic discipline to address computer games. According to his account, games constitute a new and uncharted field of investigation that is exposed to the pressures of colonization.

> The greatest challenge to computer game studies will no doubt come from within the academic world. Making room for a new field usually means reducing the resources of the existing ones, and the existing fields will also often respond by trying to contain the new area as a subfield. Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonizing attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again. (p. 2)

For Aarseth, and others who follow his lead (Douglas, 2002; Eskelinen, 2001 and 2004; Pearce, 2004), the nascent field of game studies is rhetorically situated as virgin territory that has endured and will need to struggle against the colonizing forces of the established, old world disciplines. For this reason, his account deploys many of the discursive tropes that are constitutive of and operative in the narratives of new world exploration and conquest.

> We all enter this field from *somewhere else*, from anthropology, sociology, narratology, semiotics, film studies, etc., and the political and ideological baggage we bring from our old field inevitably determines and motivates our approaches. And even more importantly, do we stay or do we go back? Do we want a separate field named computer game studies, or do we want to claim the field for our old discipline? (p. 3)

In this way, Aarseth situates scholars of computer games in the position of new world explorers. No one, he argues, is indigenous to this new land; we all come from somewhere else. And in coming from these other places, we all carry a certain amount of baggage—assumptions, methods, and practices that come to be imposed on this new territory in order to make sense of it and to domesticate it. Finally like all new world explorers and adventurers, the big question, the question that really matters for each of us, is whether to make our home in this new world or to

claim it for our homeland. Elsewhere Aarseth (2004) reiterates this claim, although in this context he leverages frontier imagery:

> the great stake-claiming race is on, and academics from neighboring fields, such as literature and film studies, are eagerly grasping 'the chance to begin again, in a golden land of opportunity and adventure' (to quote from the ad in *Blade Runner*). As with any land rush, the respect for local culture and history is minimal, while the belief in one's own tradition, tools and competence is unfailing. Computer game studies is virgin soil, ready to be plotted and plowed by the machineries of cultural and textual studies. (p. 45)

Clearly this language and these metaphors are persuasive, seductive, and powerful. At the same time, however, they deploy the problematic mythology and ideology that we identified and critiqued in the discourse of MMORPGs. Consequently the problem is not whether and to what extent other disciplines might come to "colonize" computer games and game studies or whether we resist the onslaught and support what Celia Pearce (2004), who considers herself an "'indigenous' game person," the "further development of an indigenous theory" (p. 1). The problem is that we have already defined and articulated the main problem for game studies in terms that are themselves already questionable and problematic.

Finally, one could, with some justification, end by asking the question, "so what's your solution?" Or as Neil Postman (1993) puts it, "anyone who practices the act of cultural criticism must endure being asked, What is the solution to the problems you describe?" (p. 181). This question, although entirely understandable and seemingly informed by good "common sense," is guided by a rather limited understanding of the role, function, and objective of critique—an understanding of instrumental rationality that, like the deployment of the new world and frontier metaphors, might be seen as particularly American given the legacy of Pragmatism. Colloquially the word "critique" is understood as the process of identifying problems and imperfections that then require some kind of reparation. This is the way that Postman understands and deploys "critique" in his book *Technopoly*. There is, however, a more precise and nuanced definition rooted in the tradition of critical philosophy. As Barbara Johnson (1981) characterizes it, a critique is not simply an examination of a particular system's flaws and imperfections designed to make that system better. Instead:

> it is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of that system's possibility. The critique reads backwards from what seems natural, obvious, self-evident, or universal, in order to show that these things have their history, their reasons for being the way they are, their effects on what follows from them, and that the starting point is not a given but a construct, usually blind to itself. (p. xv)

Understood in this way, critique is not an effort that simply aims to discern problems in order to fix them. There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with such a practice. Strictly speaking, however, critique involves more. It consists of an examination that seeks to identify and to expose a particular system's fundamental operations and conditions of possibility, demonstrating how what initially appears to be beyond question and entirely obvious does, in fact, possess a complex history that not only influences what proceeds from it but is itself often not recognized as such. This is the case with the terms "new world" and "frontier." Although the use of this rather powerful terminology seems innocent enough, it proceeds from and entails a rich and equally problematic history. This history not only has a considerable cost but entails an amnesic forgetting of the past that effectively blinds us to its influence. The objective of the critique, therefore, is to distinguish and to expose this particular structure, its operations, and its implications. And we do so, it is important to note, not because we oppose MMORPGs, their current use and future development, or the important research that has been undertaken thus far. Our point rather is that the current excitement about these "new worlds" and "new frontiers" needs to be tempered by an understanding of the history, logics, and ideologies that have been mobilized in the process of deploying this very terminology.

Notes

[1] Technically speaking *Second Life* is not exactly a MMORPG; then again it is not something entirely different. The FAQ on Linden Lab's (2008) website explains its ambivalent position in the following way:

> **Is Second Life a MMORPG?** Yes and no. While the Second Life interface and display are similar to most popular massively multiplayer online role playing games (or MMORPGs), there are two key, unique differences:

> 1) Creativity: Second Life provides near unlimited freedom to its Residents. This world really is whatever you make it, and your experience is what you want out of it. If you want to hang out with your friends in a garden or nightclub, you can. If you want to go shopping or fight dragons, you can. If you want to start a business, create a game or build a skyscraper you can. It's up to you.

> 2) Ownership: Instead of paying a monthly subscription fee, Residents can obtain their first Basic account for FREE. Additional Basic accounts cost a one-time flat fee of just $9.95. If you choose to get land to live, work and

> build on, you pay a monthly lease fee based on the amount of land you have. You also own anything you create—Residents retain IP rights over their in-world creations.

There is an ongoing debate over the essential characteristics of games and what is or is not a game (for more on this debate, see Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, 2007). And depending on how you look at it and who provides the explanation, *Second Life* both is and is not a MMORPG. More importantly, however, when a distinction is advanced, the leadership at Linden Lab has explained the difference by mobilizing the figure and rhetoric of *terra nova*. "I'm not building a game." Philip Rosedale, the CEO of Linden Lab and "founding father" of *Second Life* told *Wired* magazine's Daniel Terdiman in 2004. "I'm building a new country" (p. 2). In providing this explanation, however, Rosedale does not so much distinguish *Second Life* from other MMORPGs as he grounds their point of contact in a common and problematic ideology.

[2] This particular narrative trajectory, which is deployed by and manifest in many of the canonical works of Western literature, is one of the fundamental characteristics of what Edward Said (1979) called "Orientalism." Wendy Chun (2003) has traced explicit connections between the concept of Orientalism and the literary constructions of cyberspace, demonstrating how "the narratives of cyberspace, since their literary inception, have depended on Orientalism for their own disorienting orientation" (p. 4).

[3] It should not be forgotten that this particular formulation was also gendered. For this reason, the logic and rhetoric of new world exploration and frontier expansion often exhibits complex patterns of gender bias and inequality. "In the past 15 years," Nora Jaffary (2007) explains, "national and regional histories of the Americas in the era of colonization have increasingly incorporated gender analysis, fulfilling in this intriguing context Joan Scott's call for a history of how 'politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics'" (p. 8). As evidence of this, Jaffary (2007, pp. 8-9) provides a litany of recent scholarship, which includes, among other works, Ann Twinam's (1999) investigation of the gendered aspects of social status as articulated in the Spanish colonies of Central and South America, Kathleen Brown's (1996) examination of the construction of political authority in colonial Virginia by the deliberate manipulation of racial and sexual identities, and Karen Anderson's (1991) considerations of indigenous women's subjugation to French men through marriage contracts and, by extension, the subjugation of the territory of North America to the authority of the French Crown. Although it is beyond the scope of the current essay, it would be both interesting and useful to examine the ways these gendered

constructions influence and become expressed in the new worlds and frontiers of computer games and MMORPGs. By way of anticipating this subsequent analysis, we note two points of contact. First, the new world of cyberspace is, from the moment of its introduction, already gendered. According to William Gibson, who coined the neologism in his 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, cyberspace is identified as "the matrix," a term that not only has a nominal association with mathematics but also anticipates the popular vision of immersive virtual reality as exhibited by the Wachowski brother's trilogy of the same name. *Matrix*, as Gunkel (2001) points out, is a Latin word that signifies "womb." Consequently,

> the fictional cyberspace presented in Gibson's *Neuromancer* is already gendered female. Through this engendering, the novel is presented and functions according to traditional gender stereotypes and biases. Cyberspace, arguably the main female character in the novel, remains for all intents and purposes passive, formless, and receptive, while Case, the cowboy hotshot, is presented as active and is primarily defined by his penetrations into this matrix (pp. 164-165).

Second, similar gender constructions are also exposed and examined in many of the initial studies of computer graphics practices and gaming. According to Simon Penny (1995), for example, "computer-graphics production—as seen in commercial cinema, video games, theme park rides, and military simulations—is dominated by a late adolescent Western male psyche and world view" (p. 231). For this reason, the place of female characters within these virtual worlds is often informed by and formed according to gender stereotypes. According to Eugene Provenzo's (1999) analysis of Nintendo, female characters are all too often "cast as individuals who are acted upon rather than as initiators of action" (p. 100). And Shoshana Magnet (2006) traces how these particular gender constructions connect up with the colonial history of the United States, demonstrating the way that players of the video game *Tropico* are interpellated as heterosexual male colonizers (p. 146). Clearly much more can and should be said about the gendering of game environments, game play, and gamer demographics. We simply want to point out that, insofar as MMORPGs are already wired into the rhetoric and logic of colonial and frontier (mis)adventure, a great deal can be learned from looking at the way gender was constructed and mobilized in the histories and mythologies of the European encounter with the new world of North and South America and the westward expansion of the United States.

[4] How and when this took place remains an open question. MMORPGs, for instance, first became popular in south-east Asia, specifically South Korea. Did South Korean game developers, players, and critics conceptualize early MMORPGs, like *Lineage I* and *II* and

Legend of Mir, as "new worlds" and "frontiers?" Or is the new world metaphor something that comes into play only after MMORPGs become popular in Europe and North America? Although this kind of cross-cultural comparison is beyond the scope of the current essay, such an investigation would not only provide interesting points of comparison but would, insofar as the Korean peninsula has had an entirely different and unfortunate experience with the exercise of colonial power, provide another way to examine the interaction of games and culture. A good place to begin this subsequent investigation would be Dal Yong Jin and Florence Chee's "Age of New Media Empires: A Critical Interpretation of the Korean Online Game Industry" (2008).

[5] One interesting and possible exception to this is *Frontier 1859*. Although still in development, the game's design appears to be sensitive to the complexities of frontier migration:

> Two worlds collide in the struggle to survive—From the perspective of hope, Emigrants imagined the Frontier as a place to begin a new life. From the perspective of home, Native Americans were here first. Wrong or right, the decisions people made who lived on the Frontier helped them survive the hardships of life. In that process, two lifestyles became extinct, the way of the Native American Indian, and the way of the Wild Frontier. (*Frontier 1895*, 2007).

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