

Virtual “Third Places”: A Case Study of Sociability in Massively Multiplayer Games*

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Abstract. Georg Simmel [*American Journal of Sociology* 55:254–261 (1949)] is widely credited as the first scholar to have seriously examined *sociability* – “the sheer pleasure of the company of others” and the central ingredient in many social forms of recreation and play. Later Ray Oldenburg [*The Great Good Place*. New York: Marlowe & Company (1989)] extended Simmel’s work by focusing on a certain class of public settings, or “third places,” in which sociability tends to occur, such as, bars, coffee shops, general stores, etc. But while Simmel and Oldenburg describe activities and public spaces in the physical world, their concepts may apply as well to virtual or online worlds. Today Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are extensive, persistent online 3D environments that are populated by hundreds of thousands of players at any given moment. The sociable nature of these online spaces is often used to explain their success: unlike previous video games, MMOGs require players to exchange information and collaborate in real-time to progress in the game. In order to shed light on this issue, we critically examine player-to-player interactions in a popular MMOG (Star Wars Galaxies). Based on several months of ethnographic observations and computerized data collection, we use Oldenburg’s notion of “third places” to evaluate whether or not the social spaces of this virtual world fit existing definitions of sociable environments. We discuss the role online games can play in the formation and maintenance of social capital, what they can teach us about the evolution of sociability in an increasingly digitally connected social world, and what could be done to make such games better social spaces.

Key words: automated data collection, online games, sociability, third places

1. Introduction

Sociologist Georg Simmel (1949) is widely credited as the first scholar to have seriously examined sociability. He defined it as:

“a distinct social form that distills out of the realities of social life the pure essence of association, of the associative process as a value and a satisfaction [...] Sociability extracts the serious substance of life leaving only “togetherness,” the sheer pleasure of the company of others. [...] Freed of

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connection with the serious contents of life, sociability is truly a social game, and end in itself.”

In “sociability,” Simmel refers to the many varieties of playful conversation – characterized for example by anecdote, humor, witticism or flirting – that tend to emerge around recreational activities such as, card-playing, music or sports. Simmel (1949, p. 255) further proposes sociability, a “play-form of association,” as a basic human “impulse” independent of rational or economic interest.

Extending Simmel’s work on sociability, Ray Oldenburg (1989) analyzes the *places* in which sociable association tend to take place. He calls one prominent class of such settings, “third places,” and defines them as, “a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 16). Oldenburg (1989) argues that such informal public gathering places – cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, etc. – are essential to the health of communities. Oldenburg (1989, p. 4) argues that all great civilizations and great cities have their characteristic public gathering spaces, but that in post-World War II America, which is characterized by the “automobile suburb,” third places have largely disappeared.

While Simmel and Oldenburg describe activities and public spaces in the physical world, their concepts have been applied as well to virtual or online worlds (Brown, 2005; Rheingold, 1993; Steinkuehler, 2005). Of the WELL, an early text-based chat room, Rheingold (1993) writes:

“It might not be the same kind of place that Oldenburg had in mind, but so many of his descriptions of third places could also describe the WELL. Perhaps cyberspace is one of the informal public places where people can rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall. Or perhaps cyberspace is precisely the *wrong* place to look for the rebirth of community, offering not a tool for conviviality but a life-denying simulacrum of real passion and true commitment to one another.”

Like Rheingold, we see many similarities between physical third places and online communities, but we focus in particular on massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and the 3D spaces within them.

Multiplayer online games have become a phenomenon of growing social, cultural, and economic importance. Such games are not a particularly recent development: in 1969 a multiplayer version of Spacewars was already available (Koster in Mulligan and Patrovsky, 2003, Appendix E), and in the late 70s designers were already taking advantage of the capabilities of the nascent Internet to build online social worlds where gamers could meet and play (for a history of these Multi-User Dungeons or MUDS, see Bartle, 2004,

chapter 1). MMOGs, however, operate at a completely different scale than their ancestors. The most popular U.S. games of this genre, such as *World of Warcraft*,¹ routinely attract millions of subscribers (Woodcock, 2005) who simultaneously interact, collaborate and compete in simulated 3D realities.

Despite their long history and increasing usage, it took a long time for social scientists to start investigating these online environments as full-fledged social milieus – perhaps because games are often seen as “frivolous” and unworthy of attention compared to more “productive” activities (Dourish, 1998). For instance, after the creation of *LambdaMOO* at Xerox PARC, Curtis (1992) was one of the first to seriously examine patterns of social interaction in these particular online communities – almost 15 years after the creation of the first MUD. Moreover, research has not really progressed much farther since then: Bartle rightly mentions (2004, p. 500) that few sociologists have looked beyond Curtis’ (1992) seminal paper.

This research gap is particularly striking considering the importance of sociability in these games. Game designers want to promote interactions among their players since they recognize that these encounters are essential to the success of their virtual worlds: in the words of one player, “it’s the people that are addictive, not the game” (Lazzaro, 2004). Indeed, most of the activities offered by a MMOG (e.g. developing a character, fighting monsters) are already present in single player games. Some players are quite content with accomplishing these instrumental objectives: as Bartle (1996) outlined early on, not all participants in a multiplayer environment are here to socialize (see his “achiever” and “explorer” types, for instance). Still, what makes a difference for many is the shared experience, the collaborative nature of most activities and, most importantly, the reward of being socialized into a community of gamers and acquiring a reputation within it (Yee, 2002; Jakobson and Taylor, 2003).

Multiplayer games heavily rely on space (virtual space, but space nonetheless) to create and maintain a sense of community among their players. Indeed, while most of the earlier online social spaces were entirely text-based (e.g. MUDs, electronic mail and newsgroups), the newer MMOGs distinguish themselves by their rich 3D worlds. Most games have cities modeled after real-world cities and have large public spaces, as well as buildings with clearly identifiable functions (e.g. bars, banks, marketplaces). As such, they represent a fascinating laboratory to observe sociability online in a setting that tries, by design, to reproduce the features of some successful social spaces of the physical world.

In the remainder of this paper we use Oldenburg’s concept of “third places” to compare activities in a game’s social spaces (modeled after bars) to activities in the “ideal” social spaces of the physical world praised by Oldenburg. Interestingly, Oldenburg offers a set of (somewhat idealized) criteria defining the character of third places. Inspired by this earlier research, we

address the following questions: do particular social spaces *within* the world of an MMOG meet Oldenburg's criteria? If not, what are the main differences?² To explore this question, we will focus on social life in the cantinas of Star Wars Galaxies (SWG). We analyze the features of social interaction in SWG cantinas and the ways in which they resemble sociable third places in the physical world as well as the ways they do not.

We begin below with some background information about Star Wars Galaxies, focusing on the game's features meant to encourage sociability.

2. Sociability by design in SWG

SWG was, at the time of our study, the most technically advanced MMOG available. Launched in July 2003, the game was highly anticipated. On top of a well-recognized franchise and a compelling game universe, SWG promised to be more than EverQuest, the most popular MMOG to date. Indeed the designers wanted to produce a game where activities would not revolve almost exclusively around killing monsters and gaining levels, but would instead offer numerous interesting non-combat-oriented player professions. In other words, SWG was a direct attempt at better supporting the more social character of multiplayer games. Its lead designer, Raph Koster, publicly discussed its vision for a game that "reward[s] all the people who make the game world a more livable place [...]: the ones who provide entertainment, the ones who are in support roles or peaceful roles or economic roles" (Koster, 2004). This made it a particularly interesting object of study for our research.

Despite these noble goals SWG suffered from many problems in the few months following its release, and was widely criticized as an incomplete product. Membership fluctuated as a result but, with the release of several patches and improvements, the game progressively reached a more stable state. After a rocky start, SWG was estimated to have a peak membership of about 250,000 subscribers (Woodcock, 2005). This is certainly not marginal and places SWG among the most popular examples of its genre.³

The game takes place in a rich, detailed 3D environment reproducing the Star Wars universe (see Figure 1). The general mechanics of the game are similar to other MMOGs. Players control an "avatar" (a virtual body) in first- or third-person mode, and progress is based on accomplishing missions and other game objectives. Where SWG differs from other games is in the complex network of interdependencies built between players, as we explain below.

2.1. PLAYER INTERDEPENDENCIES

Although our point is not to offer a comprehensive review of the game, it is important to explain how it structures the interactions between its players. Like many other multiplayer games, SWG lets players create a character

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Figure 1. SWG's interface.

based on a series of attributes (e.g. gender, race). The physical appearance of their avatar is highly customizable, allowing players to create a distinctive looking in-game persona. But the most defining attribute of a character will be its profession. In SWG, professions can be separated into three groups: combat-oriented (e.g. marksman), service-oriented (e.g. medic, entertainer) and product-oriented (e.g. artisan). The initial profession picked by a player determines the core set of skills available to him or her in the game. To progress in these skills, players need to gain experience specific to their particular skills: for instance, medics actually gain experience for healing other characters, unlike the healers of most other MMORPGs who gain experience for killing monsters.

Professions have an enormous impact on the interactions between players. Indeed all of them are essential to the game, and they were also purposefully designed to be interdependent. To pick a simple example, marksmen need medics and entertainers to heal their wounds and “battle fatigue.”⁴ Medics, in turn, need wounded marksmen to heal and scouts to procure the resources needed to make drugs. Entertainers need tired combatants to relax but also tailors to manufacture their stage outfit. The list could be much longer: there are 8 basic and 30 advanced (or “elite”) professions available, all interrelated.

This ecology of professions is an important framework shaping player-to-player interactions: it is structured so that players must interact. The economy also plays an important role in this online world. It is, by design,

entirely player-driven (Koster, 2004). Other, more classic techniques are also employed: like EverQuest for instance, some “dungeons” in SWG are too difficult to be visited alone. Players need to form a well-balanced group before venturing into these dangerous spaces. These sequences of coordinated combat are another mechanism through which people cooperate and socialize.

All of this brings us to another central aspect of the game: the strategic organization of its virtual spaces. Indeed if players are to interact, they have to meet in the first place. In SWG space has been structured so that players have to congregate in certain locations.

2.2. USING SPACE TO PROMOTE SOCIABILITY

SWG is particularly interesting in its attempt to *create a strong sense of social life embedded in specific game locations*. Indeed, while many MMOGs have offered cities and buildings for a long time, most of these spaces have so far lacked the social life one would expect to find in such locales. The taverns of Ultima Online, for instance, were almost always empty (Koster, 2004). Even earlier in MUDs, taverns such as the “Wild Boar” on LegendMUD were not successful either (*Ibid.*). This is not to say that social hangouts do not exist: for instance, the players often appropriate informal gathering points (like spawn points in EQ) and rich interactions can frequently be had there. In SWG however, the designers have consciously tried to tie some of the game’s activities to particular locations, and structure them so that players are required to interact.

At the time of our study there were 10 planets in the game. Each is home to several cities of various sizes, which have been placed either by the game designers or later created by the players themselves. Each city, in turn, contains a variety of buildings, many of which have a specific purpose. For instance, most cities in SWG have starports/shuttleports (that is, transportation hubs), medical centers, cantinas (analogous to bars), theaters, hotels, etc. Each of these buildings enables players to perform certain actions that cannot be performed elsewhere. For instance, people gather in cantinas in part because they are one of the few places where entertainers can heal other players’ battle fatigue. There is therefore a strong incentive for entertainers to stay in cantinas, waiting for tired combatants to come watch them. Moreover, recovering from battle fatigue is not instantaneous: combat characters are forced to wait for at least a few minutes when they visit a cantina. This system has been put in place by the developers specifically to encourage player-to-player interaction. The rationale is that players can use these periods of “downtime” to engage in small talk with each other (Koster, 2004). The same principle has been applied to other locations in the game. For instance, beginning medics can only heal wounds in medical centers. As a

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consequence, medics often wait in the medical centers of the major cities for wounded players to visit. As healing takes time, doctor and patient can use it as an opportunity to interact with each other.

At this point we have seen the reason why players must interact (the professional and economic interdependencies) and where these interactions can take place (specific locations built to support certain types of services and exchanges). We now turn to how players interact: the game chat system.

2.3. INTERACTION SYSTEM

Most interactions in SWG take place via text chat, much like other MMOGs. There are three main chat modes. In “say” mode, typed utterances are visible to anybody in the vicinity of the player. These messages appear in the chat window of the other players and also in a bubble above the player’s avatar, like in a cartoon. In “tell” mode, messages are sent privately from one player to the next. The message is visible only to these two parties, and can be sent across arbitrary distances – the two players do not have to be collocated. Finally in “group” mode, messages are sent to a subset of players who have grouped together. It is similar to a one-to-many “tell”: messages are visible only to the group members, and they are not limited by physical proximity.

A feature of SWG’s interaction system that distinguishes it from other MMOGs is its wide library of gestures, or “socials.” Players can type commands such as “/smile,” “/bow,” and “/cheer” to gesture to each other (or themselves). Selecting another player and typing “/smile,” for instance, produces two results: a public utterance of the form “You smile at [target name]” is sent to the other players in the area, and in some cases the avatar is animated to reflect the “social” (here, a smile appears on the avatar’s face). At the time of our study there were 340 “socials” available to the players. As our observations show (Section 5.3.) players use them to enrich their interactions, especially at their beginning and end (e.g. engage another player with a “/wave,” “/smile” when receiving a service, and “/bow” to conclude an exchange).

SWG also features a powerful “macro” system. Players can assemble series of commands, “socials” and utterances and bind them to a single mouse click. Macros can call each other and be looped, which allows certain actions to be accomplished entirely automatically and let the player walk away from the keyboard while the character is still active. As we will later see, this also has important impacts on the interactions between the players: sometimes an avatar may give the impression of being actively controlled by a player while it is simply “AFK macroing” (a concept evolved by SWG players to describe this practice of using a macro when Away From the Keyboard).

Having painted a broad outline of the game mechanics, with a focus on the aspects most directly affecting player-to-player interactions, we now turn to a

description of the research methods we employed followed by the analysis of one particular social space: the cantinas in SWG. Indeed, as we will see below, cantinas are among the most active and densely populated social spaces of the game. They are also the closest to social spaces of the physical world (namely, bars and pubs). As such they offer a large amount of data to analyze, and they can be directly compared to Oldenburg's third places.

3. Research methods

For our study of SWG, we used complementary methods. As a preliminary step, we created characters and conducted a "virtual ethnography" (Mason, 1999; Hine, 2000) of in-game activities. To balance our view of the game as much as possible, one of the authors selected a combat-oriented profession while the other selected a more "service-oriented" one (namely, an entertainer). We logged in regularly (at least twice a week, sometimes much more, each time for at least two hours) over a six-month period, and progressively became members of the community of players on our server.⁵ As our characters evolved, we joined player cities and guilds. Our activities were recorded using a video camera connected directly to our PC's video cards. This provided us with a rich set of ethnographic data, framing our understanding of the game.

Since we were particularly interested in the design of sociable spaces, we then moved on to another phase of our study: we created two additional characters, which we placed in two cantinas on different planets.⁶ We kept them constantly connected to the server for another three months (a total of 98 days), recording publicly visible activity in these two locations. For this we used SWG's "/log" command, which captures the content of a player's chat box into a text file. This file therefore contains a record of all the public utterances and gestures made by the visitors of each specific location.⁷ The entire recording was done automatically by using a macro, and we ended up with a total of 740 Mb of chat and gestures data. While this data was accumulating, we continued our ethnographic observations with a particular attention for these two locations.

At the end of our study we built a series of tools to process the logs. We wrote a parser (implemented in Java) to process each line of the logs and extract the most useful data. In particular, our parser relies on a dictionary we also built to reliably identify the gestures used by the players, and their directionality. As a result our parser segments each event (that is, each line of the logs) into its component parts: who is interacting with whom, in what way (gesture or chat), where (Coronet or Theed), at what date and time, and what the content of the interaction is (text chat or "social" command). After parsing, the data was analyzed by a Java application we also developed to

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extract patterns of interaction we thought were reflective (or not) of interactivity and sociability in the public spaces we observed.

4. Overview of the cantina scene

Although drinking alcohol is not an activity that translates well to virtual worlds, MMORPGs nonetheless seem to always have taverns or cantinas that are meant to support the relaxed type of socializing often found in real-world bars. In other words, such taverns are intended to provide a kind of “third place” (Oldenburg, 1989) *within* the larger virtual game world. In SWG, designers have perhaps gone the furthest relative to other games in trying to create “cantinas” that are interesting places where players will go and spend time. SWG’s cantinas are somewhat seedy establishments populated by weary warriors and adventurers seeking “battle fatigue healing” from scantily clad exotic dancers and from musicians who play canned music (usually odd variations on a score from the *Star Wars* movies). They recreate reasonably well the atmosphere of the cantina from the first *Star Wars* movie, in which the world first meets Han Solo, and of Jabba the Hutt’s palace from *Return of the Jedi* (especially the later revised version of the movie) (Figure 2).

Through our ethnography, we observed three kinds of social activities that tend to take place in SWG cantinas: service delivery, “xp grinding,” and socializing. First, the cantinas were designed as places to which all characters must go from time to time in order to receive certain services. These include “battle fatigue healing” and “mind buffing.” Indeed, when characters engage in combat, they endure “battle fatigue,” or wounds to their “mind pool.”



Figure 2. One of SWG’s cantinas.

In order to “heal” these mind wounds, they must “watch” a dancer or “listen” to a musician (game commands they can activate easily by simply clicking on an entertainer) for several minutes. While they may receive this service for free, it is customary to “tip” the entertainer 100 credits or so. In addition, characters can receive a temporary boost to their mind pools, or “mind buff,” from accomplished dancers and musicians. For this service it is customary to pay the entertainer, and at the time of our study, the going rate for a mind buff was 5000 credits. Mind buffs can take up to 15 minutes to apply depending on the number of characters being buffed at once. Thus, the designers created an instrumental incentive for players to visit cantinas which effectively forces them to go at least occasionally.

In addition to entertainer services, another activity that goes on in cantinas is what is called “xp grinding,” that is, an optimized and extended earning of experience points.⁸ By playing an entertainer profession (i.e., dancer or musician), one quickly learns from other players that the most efficient method for earning experience points is to join an “entertainer group” in one of the more densely populated cantinas and run a looping macro. Dancing or playing music while in an entertainer group generates experience points at a higher rate than can be earned alone. In addition, SWG provides players with a powerful macro functionality through which they can write a script to perform most game functions automatically. Entertainers use this to create a dance or music routine and then loop it so that it plays continuously. The character will continuously generate xp even when the player is away from the keyboard. Players typically leave even their characters running through the night after they go to bed.

But entertainers are not the only professions that grind xp in the SWG cantinas. Medics can frequently be found there as well. As entertainers dance or play, they deplete their “action pool.” In order to keep performing without stopping to rest, they typically must receive healing from a medic. Thus, medics can find a concentrated source of patients in the cantinas, enabling them to earn xp at a rapid rate as they hang out. Hence, in response to the instrumental function of cantinas, players to varying degrees orient to cantinas as *places of work*, rather than as places for play.

However, in and around the instrumental activities of providing services and “grinding xp,” players also frequently seize the opportunity to socialize. Players commonly make small talk, exercise their humor and wit, share tips about the intricacies of the game, and improvise “in character” dialogues. For example, when dancers provide a “mind buff” to customers, the two have about 10 minutes of downtime during which they may or may not choose to interact. The following log excerpt shows the kind of playful small talk that can emerge while the two wait for the service to be completed (Atac is the dancer and Ray is the customer):

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03:49 Atac: what are you up to tonight?
04:02 Ray: heading to endor to hunt
04:08 Atac: alone?
04:20 Ray: no no
04:29 Ray: I’m meeting someone
04:30 Atac: oh good
04:36 Ray heals Atac for 358 action damage.
04:49 Atac: it can get dangerous out there
05:00 Ray: believe me I know
05:12 Atac: will you bring me an Ewok?
05:16 Atac: pleeeeeeeese
05:24 Ray: stuffed or live?
05:28 Ray heals Atac for 458 action damage.
05:28 Atac: hehe
05:32 Atac: live
05:47 Atac: no stuffed would be less hassle

In this case, the dancer initiates non-instrumental interaction with a generic question about the customer’s plans (“what are you up to tonight?”) which develops into a somewhat humorous “in character” dialogue about bringing back an “ewok” as a souvenir (such dialogue is known in the game culture as “role playing”⁹). Thus we see that the dancer and her customer chat in much the same way one might chat to one’s hairstylist while waiting for the haircut to be performed. This is an example of downtime that the designers have build into the game in order to encourage social exchanges such as this one.

In addition to small talk and role playing, players tend to use their avatars and the wide selection of dances that entertainers can do to humorous effect. A common gag is what we call the “unlikely male exotic dancer” (see Figure 3) – a player who purposefully creates “weird” or “ugly” characters and dresses them in outrageous ways when they perform on the cantina’s dance floor.



Figure 3. The unlikely male exotic dancer.

Such characters are often regulars at particular cantinas and become recognizable by all. Their visual humor tends to elicit laughs and jokes throughout the cantina (see log excerpt) and greatly contribute to its playful atmosphere.

28:45 Moann: hasn't the overweight entertainer in hot pants bit been done to death

28:59 Elter: lol¹⁰

28:59 Frito Frito: lol

29:05 Frito Frito: i was the original fat guy in hot pants :)

29:06 Atac [playfully]: not as much as the hot Twi'lek dancer

In observing cantina life, we discovered that not all cantinas are the same. Cantinas in different locations had very different reputations within the player community. For example, the cantina in Coronet City was known as a “grind hall.” It was located on the most centrally located planet and was always busy. However, nearly half of the characters were on a looping macro grinding xp while the player was “away from keyboard” (AFK). As a result, Coronet City was a great place to level your entertainer character, but it was known as having a poor atmosphere for socializing and role playing. As one role player told us:

03:11 Atac: Coronet is my usual stomping ground

03:42 Mona: coronet? ugh

03:46 Atac: yeah

03:48 Atac: I know

03:57 Atac: but there's always a lot of people there

03:59 Mona: whenever I visit there, which is fortunately not often, I see spiced out zombies

04:05 Atac: hehe

04:09 Mona Garcia: what use are people if they are braindead?

04:19 Atac: it's also known as the AFK Cafe

04:35 mona tells you: ooc afk hell... I will not spend time there

05:56 mona tells you: ooc this here [Mos Eisley cantina] is full of role-players... I much prefer it to the leet dewds¹¹ in cnet [i.e., Coronet City cantina]

On the other hand, the cantina in Theed had a reputation for having a much better social atmosphere, but still being busy enough to enable a reasonable rate of earning experience points. For example, a group of role players we observed exclusively frequented the Theed cantina and avoided the one in Coronet. Furthermore, the cantina in Mos Eisley (the location of the infamous cantina from the original *Star Wars* movie) had a reputation as being an exclusive hang out for role players but as being an inadequate place to grind xp due to the small numbers of visitors. Thus, when we later collected quantitative data (see below), we captured chat logs from more than

one cantina in order to gain some perspective on this diversity across locations.

We see then from our ethnography that SWG cantinas are lively social spaces within the game. From our participation in these settings as a member of the dancer profession, we gained a deep understanding of the kinds of activities that take place there, the kinds of sociability that emerge, and the reputations among players of the various cantinas. Overall our impression is that at times, SWG cantinas are very successful social spaces, especially for those pursuing entertainer professions. However, what we could not gain from the ethnography was a sense of how generic and representative the activities we observed really were. To this end, we turned to quantitative analysis to assess the degree to which SWG’s cantinas fit Oldenburg’s criteria for a third place.

5. Cantinas as third places

For Oldenburg, the function of the third place is to serve the community by hosting “regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals” (cf. quote on p.14). To achieve this however, third places must have a set of unique characteristics. Not all public spaces are third places, even though members of a community often appropriate spaces for socializing that were not necessarily built with this goal in mind.

Oldenburg examined in great detail what differentiates third places from other public spaces. In his book, he describes his “ideal type” (Weber, 1949) for these social spaces. Before applying Oldenburg’s framework to our data, it is important to emphasize the exaggerated and almost caricatural nature of his criteria. We do not intend to use his theory as a “black and white” delineation between successful and unsuccessful public spaces, where anything not fitting his definitions to the letter would be considered a failure of sociability. Indeed, Oldenburg’s work remains controversial and many enjoyable social spaces fit his vision only partially. Therefore, when analyzing the data we obtained from SWG’s cantinas, we use Oldenburg’s criteria merely as indicators of the activities a social space should support, not as definite rules.

5.1. THIRD PLACES ARE NEUTRAL GROUND

“Friends can be numerous and often met only if they may easily join and depart one another’s company. [...] we need a good deal of immunity from those whose company we like best. [...] people can be sociable only when they have some protection from each other. [...Neutral grounds are] places where individuals may come and go as they please.” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. xviii, 22).

Table I. Presence, visits and length of stay

		Coronet	Theed
Number of unique visitors		7167	7277
Days of presence	Median	2	2
	Average	4.3	5
	Std. dev.	5.6	7.1
Number of visits	Median	3	4
	Average	11.1	14.2
	Std. dev.	32.8	37.4
Length of stay (minutes)	Median	6.8	7.9
	Average	130.1	77.4
	Std. dev.	860.9	361

For Oldenburg, the success of a third place is predicated in part on its traffic patterns. As a “neutral ground,” there must be a minimum amount of comings and goings reflecting each visitor’s freedom to enter and leave the place as they wish. To see how well cantinas fit this criterion, we computed several metrics illustrative of each location’s foot traffic. First, we computed how many days each visitor was present in our logs and, for each day, how many visits they made to the cantina. We also computed their average length of stay.

Table I shows that cantinas are visited by a large number of players. Most, however, do not stay very long and do not visit frequently either. Players visited the cantinas five days on average (out of 98 possible). Each day they made two to three visits to the cantina. For a large majority of players, these visits are short: the median values range from 7 to 8 minutes. Incidentally, this is about the time needed to heal battle fatigue. The average values and their standard deviation, however, are much higher. This indicates that a significant minority of players stays for very long stretches of time, often for several hours (particularly in Coronet). In fact, the frequency distribution for all variables approximates a power law (see Figure 4 for days of presence; all other variables are similar), much like many phenomena in other Internet-based communities (Huberman, 2001). Overall Theed’s visitors tend to visit more frequently and stay longer (Mann–Whitney U test for the three variables, $p < 0.05$) but the actual differences are small.

We then analyzed three dimensions of interactivity: for each player we counted how many gestures they directed to others, how many they received in return, and finally how many public utterances they made. Based on our ethnographic observations, we know that gestures are a good indicator of a character’s interactivity and its success at attracting attention. Elaborate role-players, for instance, use many gestures and receive many in return, while more instrumental players tend to shun them. The number of utterances is

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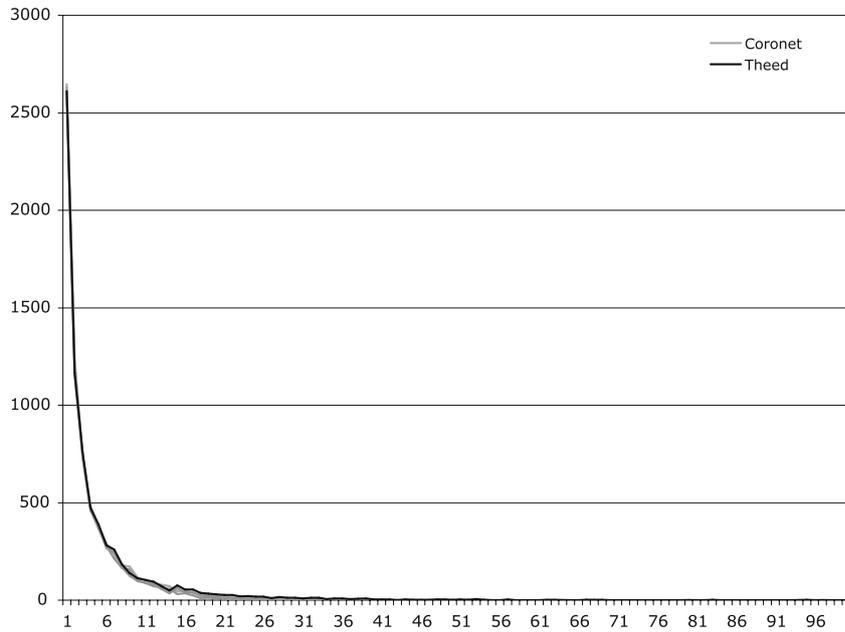


Figure 4. Frequency distribution for days of presence, in each cantina.

another interesting indicator of interactivity, this time focused on the dynamics of player conversations.

The balance of these three dimensions yields interesting insight into what kind of social environment each cantina is. We normalized the three dimensions for each player by dividing them by their number of days of presence, so that the most frequent visitors did not skew the data too much (see Table II).

Overall this data seems to reflect a relatively low level of interactivity: each day on average, a player goes into the cantina and makes two to three

Table II. Interactivity metrics

		Coronet	Theed
Gestures sent/day	Median	0.6	0.8
	Average	2.2	2.8
	Std. dev.	10.1	12.2
Gestures received/day	Median	1	1
	Average	2.1	2.9
	Std. dev.	9.5	8
Utterances/day	Median	3	3.25
	Average	13.5	10.2
	Std. dev.	66.5	32

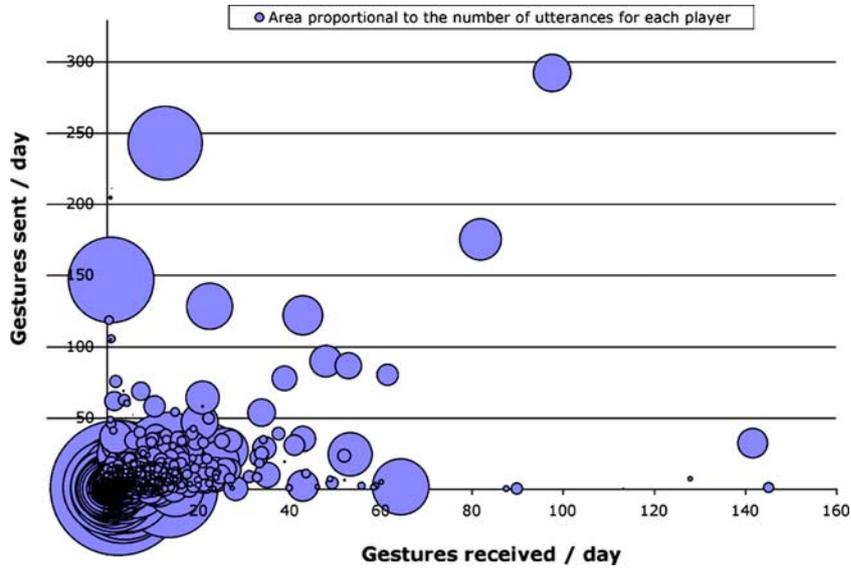


Figure 5. Interaction profiles in Coronet.

gestures towards other players, exchanges a dozen sentences with them, and receives two to three gestures in return. Interactivity is significantly lower in Coronet (Mann–Whitney U test for the three variables, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, it is important to note that interaction profiles are not uniform in each cantina. To illustrate this phenomenon, we mapped the three dimensions on a graph for each location (Figures 5 and 6):

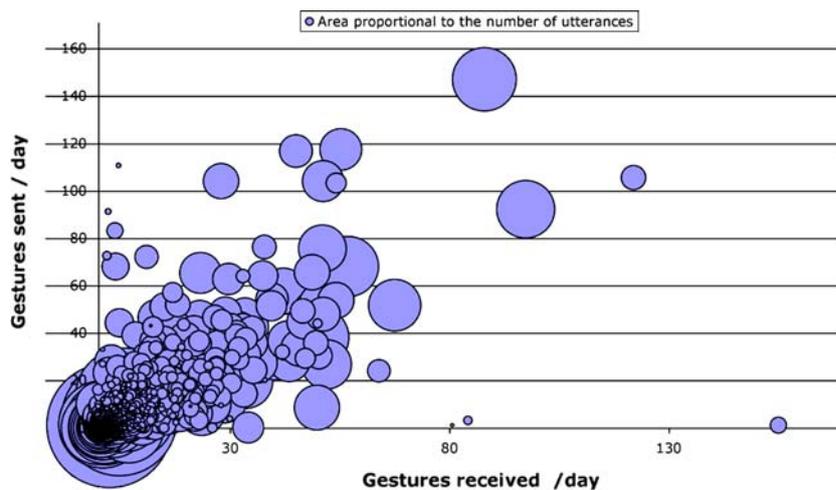


Figure 6. Interaction profiles in Theed.

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Here we see interesting differences and similarities between the two cantinas. In both, a large majority of visitors are clustered in the lower left quadrant of the graphs. These are the “customers”: they come in, exchange a few words and gestures with those present while getting their battle fatigue healed, and then leave. This quantitative data is well aligned with our qualitative observations: the majority of players visit the cantina for instrumental purposes (namely, healing). Doing so simply requires watching a dancer or listening to a musician (using a “watch” or “listen” command) for a few minutes. No interaction with the entertainer is required to receive this service. Some players may chat or gesture with the entertainers or even tip them, but the majority does not (for an extended analysis, see Ducheneaut and Moore, 2004).

In both Coronet and Theed, a significant number of visitors are extremely talkative, in some cases sending a large number of gestures to other players, although they receive very few gestures from other players. While these players may appear at first to be the hardcore “socializers” in these spaces, in fact the opposite is true. Insights from the ethnography and an analysis of the content of their chat messages show that the actions of these players are generated by a looping macro, rather than an active player. Although they fill the public space with chat messages and gesture emotes, they are not truly interactive. As expected, in Coronet there are many players with this profile, which gives the graph its characteristic unbalanced shape. In Theed on the other hand, the graph is more balanced. While there is a large number of “AFK macro-ers” also, a substantial number of visitors seem to be truly interactive: they send and receive a large number of gestures, and they are quite talkative without being overwhelming. These numbers fit perfectly with reputations of each cantina that we observed among the player community.

Overall this data paints a mixed picture of the cantina as neutral ground. On the one hand, a large number of players are not compelled to stay for too long. Their interactions are very short, and they visit mostly for instrumental purposes. In this sense cantinas may be too neutral: they look like “battle fatigue drive-thrus” where players come in, quickly get a service, and then leave. On the other hand, a smaller but very visible fraction of the visitors has a completely different attitude. They stay for long periods of time, most of it on automatic pilot by running a macro. As such, they also contradict the spirit of a neutral ground:

“Third places remain upbeat because those who enjoy them ration the time they spend there. They leave when or before the magic begins to fade. [...] There is no duty to stay in such a place beyond its ability to provide satisfaction” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 57).

SWG’s cantinas, therefore, differ from neutral grounds in two extreme ways. Based on the very short interactions we observed in a majority of cases, it is

quite possible that the “magic” mentioned by Oldenburg does not even have time to appear, let alone fade. There is, indeed, no duty to stay in a cantina beyond its ability to provide satisfaction... in a very instrumental sense: as soon as their battle fatigue reaches zero, players run away. For other players, there is a “duty” to stay beyond the ability of the place to provide satisfaction. One group of gamers feel compelled to leave their characters in the cantinas to accumulate experience points at an accelerated rate. They automate their characters to give them a semblance of liveliness and attract the attention of visitors. For others, macros are an easy way to constantly repeat commercial advertisements for in-game products and services offered outside the cantinas – the examples below are typical:

Player X [sings]: come visit Palto’s Protection Pantheon at 350 –5815 south of Coronet! Right now I stock advanced composite, 80% kinetic special protection with a 67% base!

Player Y [shouts]: Teaching Entertainer 4/4/4/4, Scout 4/0/4/0, Image Designer 4/4/4/4, and Creature Handler 4/4/4/4 for FREE, Also Selling 4 HOLOCRONS for 450k each, PST!

And indeed, SWG’s players spend a large amount of time shopping. In fact, it is an alternative outlet to “grinding” in case of boredom or lack of social contacts: when there is nothing to do in SWG, you can always buy something. And due to the importance of the economic system for the advancement of players, some player cities have turned into little more than gigantic shopping malls. In his characteristically emphatic manner, Oldenburg argued that such consumerism would “pervert” leisure:

“To our considerable misfortune, the pleasures of the city have been largely reduced to consumerism. [...] leisure has been perverted into consumption. An aggressive driving force behind this perversion is advertising. [It] is, in its ideology and effects, the enemy of an informal public life. It breeds alienation. It convinces people that the good life can be individually purchased” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 10–11).

Our data illustrates that advertising can indeed be the “enemy of public life” in SWG when it invades a social space and overwhelms other forms of interaction.

These profiles are, however, represented differently in the two cantinas. While Coronet seems to be overrun by “drive-thru” visitors, “grinders,” and advertisers, Theed is more balanced. Many of its visitors appear to follow Oldenburg’s principle and have interactive but bounded visits. It is clear, however, that the design of the cantinas affect their ability to function as neutral grounds: while the interdependencies between entertainers and other professions certainly attract visitors, the balance can easily tip in favor of one

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of two interaction extremes, none of which are particularly beneficial to sociability.

5.2. THE THIRD PLACE IS A LEVELER AND A MIXER

Third places are not simply neutral in terms of freedom of movement: they also erase individual distinctions between their visitors.

“[Third places] do not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion. [...] the charm and flavor of one’s personality, irrespective of his or her station in life, is what counts [...] beyond the contexts of purpose, duty, or role” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 24–25).

Here it is worth noting that SWG’s design runs exactly against this principle. Indeed, cantinas were designed so that players would visit them *because* they know the roles of the people within it (namely, entertainers). Players are strongly cast into roles when they cross the doors of a cantina: some are there to perform a service (musicians, dancers) and others are there to benefit from this service. Most visitors have a purpose: to get healed, or to buy a buff. In this respect, SWG’s cantinas clearly do not fit one of Oldenburg’s central criteria. But another part of the “leveling” function of third places is that they encourage interaction:

“[In a third place] everybody knows just about everybody. [...] A third place is a mixer.” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. xvii).

It is true that cantinas are densely populated (around 7,000 visitors for each). We also computed the average daily number of visitors: 314 in Coronet, and 373 in Theed. The question, however, is how many of these players would count as acquaintances. Hence we computed simple social network metrics: prestige (how many unique visitors interacted with each participant, based on their incoming gestures) and centrality (how many unique visitors each participant interacted with, as expressed by their outgoing gestures) (Table III).

Table III. Centrality and prestige

		Coronet	Theed
Prestige	Median	1	2
	Average	3.9	7
	Std. dev.	8.9	16.7
Centrality	Median	1	1
	Average	4	7.2
	Std. dev.	11.6	25.6

On average, a player in Coronet interacts with 4 different people during all of his visits. Out of a daily number of visitors of 314, this means that each player “knows” at most 1.2% of the population – far from everybody. In Theed, the ratio is not much better (7 out of 373, that is, 1.9%). The differences between the two cantinas are significant (Mann–Whitney U test, $p < 0.05$), with Coronet ranking lower on both variables. Overall cantinas would therefore appear to be fairly impersonal places, if we follow Oldenburg’s criterion to the letter. But it is worth mentioning that cantinas may also be victims of their own success: of course, in a heavily trafficked place, the overall proportion of people anybody knows is always smaller. But still, being able to interact with four to seven previously unknown people certainly sounds desirable. While cantinas may not be exactly comparable to a cozy English pub, it seems they still allow some previously non-existing connections to be created between people. In this they are a mixer, albeit not a very thorough one.

5.3. PLAYFUL CONVERSATION IS THE MAIN ACTIVITY

“Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful, and engaging” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 26).

To test this criterion, we computed additional metrics to gauge the “liveliness” and “engaging” nature of the conversation in SWG’s cantinas. First we computed a “signal-to-noise” ratio (S/N): the proportion of unique sentences (not repeated continuously) in the entire communication channel (Table IV).

Here we see important differences between the two locations. In particular, Coronet’s cantina has a much larger number of automated players: overall only a third of the talk is genuinely interactive. Theed, on the other hand, is probably a more sociable space: about two thirds of the talk is genuine player-to-player exchanges. The differences are significant, with Coronet ranking lower on all metrics (Mann–Whitney U test, $p < 0.05$). This is consistent with our ethnographic observations. Coronet is considered the number one “grind hall” where entertainer experience points can be gained

Table IV. S/N ratios

	Coronet	Theed
Total # of sentences	699,135	616,076
Unique sentences	247,766	438,689
S/N ratio	0.35	0.71

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Table V. Individual S/N ratios

		Coronet	Theed
Unique utterances/day	Median	2.5	3
	Average	5.8	7.4
	Std. dev.	12.3	14.9
S/N ratio	Median	0.96	0.97
	Average	0.76	0.77
	Std. dev.	0.35	0.35

most efficiently by using macros. It is rare to be able to talk to someone, as two players highlight humorously:

01:37:07 Player A: you know, you are the only girl that isnt a windup toy here tonight

01:37:46 Player B: and you too say different things.. w/o being on a loop

01:37:57 Player B: i think they used to call them..

01:38:01 Player B: conversations?

01:38:07 Player A: lol

We then computed the same values for each participant (average daily values in Table V; individual plots in Figure 3):

Interestingly it seems that, on average, Coronet’s visitors do not automate much of their speech ($S/N = 0.76$) (Figure 7). While their average number of unique utterances per day is fairly low (about 6), it seems that for most people these are genuine interactions. The low S/N ratio for the entire cantina

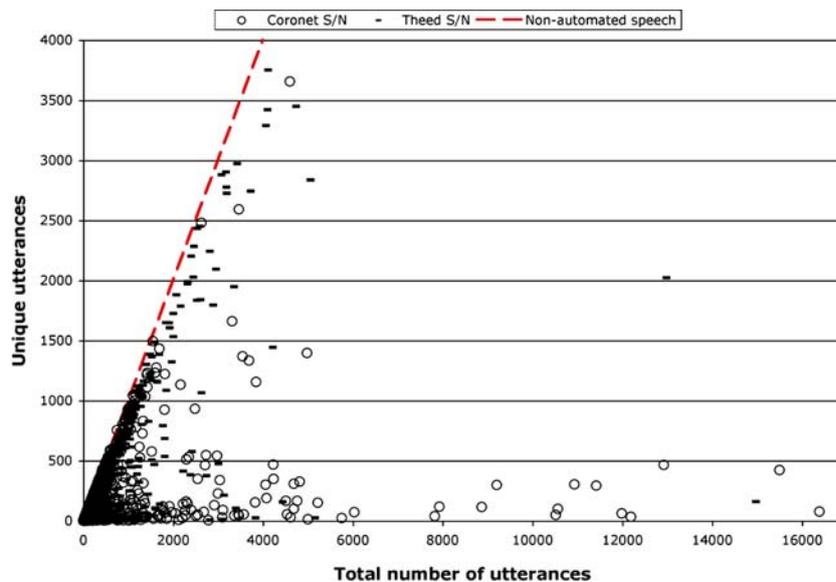


Figure 7. Individual S/N ratios in both cantinas.

is therefore due to a minority of extremely vociferous players who constantly repeat the same sentences over and over again, as can be seen on Figure 3.

By contrast, note in the same graph how different Theed’s visitors are. There are fewer players running macros producing large amounts of redundant text, which explains why the average individual S/N ratio is much closer to the ratio for the entire cantina. This paints two strikingly different pictures. In Theed talk is indeed lively and varied, a necessary condition to the emergence of sociability. In Coronet there is more life and diversity than immediately meets the eye, but a small minority of players set a dominant tone of mindless droning and lifeless monologues. As Oldenburg said,

“The conversational superiority of the third place is also evident in the harm that the bore can there inflict. [...] Conversation is a lively game, but the bore hogs the ball, unable to score but unwilling to pass it to others” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 29).

“Spammers” are indeed the bore of Coronet’s cantina: they hog the conversational ball and create unfavorable conditions for the emergence of sociability. But while conversational liveliness is an important component of a third place, the tone of the conversations is equally important:

“Compared to the speech in other realms, [conversation in third places] is more dramatic and more often attended by laughter and the exercise of wit. [...] Those who would keep conversation serious for more than a minute are almost certainly doomed to failure” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 29, 37).

We decided to compute an “index of fun” – how many joyful utterances and gestures (for example, “/laugh,” “rofl”) were used by each player during each hour of their visits (Table VI). This metric may sound strange, but it is in fact grounded in past research:

“It has been noted that the average American laughs about fifteen time per day. Fifteen times an hour would be a conservative estimate for those in a third place on one of its lesser days” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 52).

In Table VI, we can see that each cantina is almost exactly as upbeat as Oldenburg’s minimum standard – it is clear that humor plays a significant

Table VI. Index of fun

		Coronet	Theed
Laughter/hour of visit	Average	15.4	14.4
	Std. dev.	64.9	52.7

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role (the differences are not significant, Mann–Whitney U test with $p > 0.05$). Moreover the data is once again quite skewed and a smaller fraction of the population jokes and laughs much more than others. These “humorists” are very important and contribute greatly to the social atmosphere of the cantinas. In the example below, note how one visitor makes fun of one possible “grinder”:

21:48:35 Player A: my holocron said for me to master dancer:)

21:49:00 Player B: My holocron told me to uninstall SWG..))

We saw countless examples of this kind of gentle teasing that is characteristic of third places:

“Much humor within third places plays on a characteristic impoliteness, which really communicates affection. [...] Much is communicated by these personalized excursions into low humor. The victim and the assailants have known each other for sometime. Their relationship is not fragile. An invitation to a duel of wits has been extended. A fraternity exists here” (Oldenburg, p. 53).

Moreover, the gestures used by players in the cantinas also reflect a sociable atmosphere of humorous and joyous interaction, as the table (Table VII) below illustrates. As in previous studies, it appears that friendly and positive gestures (e.g. smiles, cheers) far outweigh conflictual or non-committal gestures (Smith et al., 2000). None of the more antagonistic gestures (e.g. “slap”) available in the “socials” library appears in the top 10.

Therefore, while “spammers” and “grinders” pollute the conversational space, their numerical importance can easily hide the number of genuine, humorous and playful interaction between the cantina’s visitors. Even if we know that visits are, on average, quite short, it is clear that a great many people are having a good time. In this respect cantinas clearly play a role analogous to the third places of the real world.

Table VII. Most popular gestures in the cantinas

Gesture	% of total
Smile	18.13
Cheer	9.57
Clap	7.77
Wave	6.27
Wink	4.22
Grin	3.72
Nod	3.23
Bow	3.22
Thank	2.51
Greet	2.40

5.4. THIRD PLACES HAVE REGULARS

“It is the regulars who give the place its character. [...] third places are dominated by their regulars but not necessarily in numerical sense. [They] set the tone of conviviality. [They provide] the infectious and contagious style of interaction” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 33–34).

We focused on the “regulars” by isolating and running separate analyses for players who were present at least one day a week (days of presence ≥ 14), a third of the time (presence ≥ 33) and half the time (presence ≥ 49) in our sample (Table VIII).

Depending on the cantina observed and how stringent one’s definition of a regular is, the proportion of regulars ranges from about 9% to being negligible. These numbers are quite low and indicate that, at any time, the cantina is mostly populated by transient visitors. This is consistent with our ethnographic observation: although initially there appears to be a recognizable set of regulars, they tend to disappear after about two weeks, which is the average time required to master the entertainer professions. This reflects the instrumental use of cantinas as “grind halls” rather than as sociable places.

However Oldenburg is careful to emphasize that regulars are not necessarily important in the numerical sense: instead, they “set the tone of conviviality.” Therefore we recomputed the “index of fun” for each group of regulars (Table IX):

It appears that the regulars in both cantinas are not being more humorous than the general population. In fact, in Coronet they are noticeably less so, up to the point of using almost no “fun” emotes and utterances. To go even further we also recomputed participation metrics for each group of “regulars” (Tables X and XI):

Table VIII. Number of regulars

Players visiting the cantina for...	Coronet	Theed
14 days or more [% total] – G1	422 [5.9%]	628 [8.6%]
33 days or more [% total] – G2	36 [0.5%]	100 [1.4%]
49 days or more [% total] – G3	4 [0%]	23 [0.3%]

Table IX. Index of fun for the regulars

	Coronet	Theed
G1	8.9 ($\sigma^2 = 17.7$)	12.6 (20.2)
G2	7.1 ($\sigma^2 = 8.4$)	11.7 (8.8)
G3	1.6 ($\sigma^2 = 2.1$)	12.5 (6.6)

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Here again we see interesting differences between the two cantinas. While the “regulars” of Coronet, on average, talk and gesture more each day than transient visitors, their S/N ratio is lower for their talk (see Table IV for comparison). However their centrality and prestige are much higher. For instance the “regulars” present more than 49 days interacted, on average, with 86 unique visitors – more than 20 times the number for transient visitors. This clearly indicates that they are exposed to a larger portion of the total population.

However there are different profiles among these regulars (reflected in the large standard deviations for each metric). Some of them are indeed here because they enjoy the company of others, and also because they care about the place. On the other hand many of Coronet’s “regulars” are simply a subset of the “grinders.” They stay for extremely long periods of time running a macro, accumulating as many experience points as possible. During their stay however, they do not interact much with the cantina’s visitors. In fact, it is very probable that nobody is at the keyboard controlling the avatar most of the time. Here is an example of the macro run by one of these “grinders” for more than 49 days (his S/N ratio: 0.07!):

15:29:56 Player X [sings]: HEAL ME BABY ALL NIGHT LONG!!

15:30:57 Player X [sings]: i’m a SEXY, SEXY BABY!!!

In Theed, the “regulars” are generally much more interactive than other visitors (see Table IV for comparison). They clearly talk more, gesture more and receive more gestures in return, and overall much of their talk is genuine conversation. While there are differences between certain player profiles, the “regulars” of Theed appear to be a more coherent group (as illustrated by the smaller standard deviations for each metric, especially for those regulars who stay the longest). They also interact with a larger number of visitors (119 unique contacts on average for the most present regulars, that is, about 17 times more contacts than transient visitors).

Overall, our observations of the cantina’s regulars yield mixed results. While there is evidence for the presence of regulars in both Coronet and Theed, they represent only a tiny sub-fraction of the total visitors. Moreover, it is very rare even for regulars to remain for long periods of time in the cantina. This often due to the fact that, as entertainers master their profession, they leave public cantinas for other pursuits. This is a problem since regularity of attendance is a major factor distinguishing third place regulars from other customers:

“It is the lone stranger who is most apt to become a regular. What he must do is establish trust. [...] Mainly, one simply keeps reappearing and tries not to be obnoxious. Of these two requirements for admission or acceptance, regularity of attendance is clearly the more important” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 35).

Table X. Interaction profiles of the “regulars” in Coronet (average and standard deviation for each metric)

	Utterances/day	Gestures sent/day	Gestures received/day	Unique utterances/day	Utterances S/N	Unique gestures/day	Gestures S/N	Prestige	Centrality
G1	38.8 ($\sigma^2 = 101.5$)	4.4 (13.9)	4.1 (7.3)	10.5 (11.9)	0.67 (0.3)	3 (5.4)	0.79 (0.22)	23.2 (22.5)	23 (27.3)
G2	45.9 ($\sigma^2 = 50.2$)	6.9 (9.8)	5.7 (5.2)	18.5 (17.9)	0.61 (0.31)	4.6 (7.3)	0.74 (0.24)	56.5 (40.6)	53 (50)
G3	36.6 ($\sigma^2 = 31.3$)	4 (3)	8.4 (6.2)	18.4 (24.3)	0.61 (0.36)	3.7 (2.6)	0.85 (0.1)	86 (68)	67 (59.6)

Table XI. Interaction profiles of the “regulars” in Theed (average and standard deviation for each metric)

	Utterances/day	Gestures sent/day	Gestures received/day	Unique utterances/day	Utterances S/N	Unique gestures/day	Gestures S/N	Prestige	Centrality
G1	21.8 ($\sigma^2 = 9.9$)	8.6 (2.9)	7.7 (3.4)	15.6 (8.3)	0.84 (0.9)	5.9 (2.7)	0.8 (0.84)	41 (28)	46 (23)
G2	31.6 ($\sigma^2 = 42.2$)	10.8 (17.5)	9.7 (11.9)	23.6 (30.6)	0.82 (0.18)	8.5 (12.6)	0.77 (0.16)	83.8 (56.5)	93.4 (105.8)
G3	43.2 ($\sigma^2 = 54.6$)	13.2 (13.3)	13.7 (12.1)	27.7 (26.3)	0.77 (0.2)	10.6 (10)	0.73 (0.17)	118.9 (73.1)	118.5 (79.3)

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Still, regulars interact with more visitors than other players during their stay, and this probably increases the number of acquaintances they make. They also provide a fixed reference point for the many transient visitors. All of these attributes benefit sociability and give cantinas some resemblance to third places of the physical world.

Due to their small numbers, however, it is hard for the regulars to “set the tone” in the cantinas. In Coronet, some of the regulars are even detrimental to the social atmosphere of the place since they mindlessly repeat a macro. There is more evidence in Theed that regulars do indeed promote cheerful conversations and that they have a genuine interest in the mood of the place.

5.5. CANTINAS IN PLAYER CITIES

In this study, we have analyzed the characteristics of social life in two “big city” cantinas in SWG; however, through our virtual ethnography, we observed another type of cantina in which rich sociability could sometimes be found that deserves brief mention. Although players could not “live” (i.e., place and arrange furniture, drop inventory items, etc.) in the developer-created cities of SWG, they could create their own cities. Players could erect city halls, player association halls, medical centers, cantinas, and houses the interiors of which they could decorate as they wished. Yet as Oldenburg (1989, p. 4) warns, “Houses alone do not a community make.”

SWG’s “player cities,” although they provided little instrumental value beyond extended storage space, became especially popular among “role players” because they enabled them to design backdrops for their dramatic improvisations. “Player-hosted events” of many kinds – grand openings, weddings, tournaments, parties, swap meets, and even *Star Wars* Jeopardy games – tended to be organized by players and held in such cities, especially in the player cantinas, and far out of sight of the major metropolitan areas.

Although successful player-hosted events tend to involve rich sociability, they constitute what Oldenburg refers to as “parties” rather than “third places.” Unlike activity in third places, parties are scheduled and require considerable hosting efforts.

“Getting together with neighbors entails considerable hosting efforts. [...] a lively round of after-dinner conversation isn’t as simple as a walk to the corner pub – one has to host the dinner” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 8, 12).

This is no less true for player-hosted events. A prominent event organizer for one player city, who organized many well-attended events, laments the amount of work involved in hosting:

“...running any sort of event is a TREMENDOUS effort in organization & promotion (not to mention decorating & setup if needbe) by the event

organizer... leaving little time for other activities such as hunting, question, socializing, etc. And then, on top of preparation, I actually have to be PRESENT for my own event...”

In an attempt to reduce this high level of organizing effort, this player tried to create a regular event (a Friday night dance club) that could happen with or without her. In other words, she attempted to create a third place in her player city. Ultimately however she failed. She could only generate an adequate level of attendance through considerable promoting via in-game email, public announcements, and a guild forum. There was no incidental foot traffic from players who were not directly invited as the player city was too far away from any major transportation hubs or points of interest. In the end, this player hostess burned out and left the game. Shortly after, the once vibrant social life of her player city dried up, and the city was abandoned. Our ethnographic observations suggest that this pattern is all too typical. So what player cantinas offer in terms of customizable spaces for players to host events, they lack in terms of foot traffic. Just like physical spaces, this is a crucial variable in the eventual success of an online third place.

6. Discussion

Our analyses of interactions in the Theed and Coronet cantinas have shed some light on how successful these places are at supporting sociability. Overall the picture is mixed. On the one hand, cantinas can be too much of a neutral ground, with a low retention of visitors. Most visits are short and instrumental: visitors, far from being stripped of the trappings of roles, instead come to cantinas specifically to obtain specific services. There are few regulars and, even when there are repeated visitors, they may simply be “grinding” experience points on a macro instead of interacting with the other visitors. Finally, playful conversation does not seem to be the main activity (but it is clearly a fraction of the total activity, in proportions that vary depending on the cantina observed).

On the other hand, cantinas are successful at attracting a large fraction of the game population. They are densely populated and this guarantees that, despite the “noise” of grinders and spammers, a small fraction of “socializers” will be there to genuinely interact with the visitors. The proportion of these socializers vary enormously between the two locations however, with Coronet being almost entirely overrun by instrumental players while Theed is closer to a social hangout. No matter which cantina is visited, players get to interact with four to seven new people – low numbers at first sight, but which compare favorably to third places of the real world. For the regular “socializers” of Theed, these numbers are much higher: we saw them interact with more than 100 different players over our observation period. This shows

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that, as long as players are willing to remain in the cantina and genuinely try to interact, they can greatly increase their number of in-game contacts. This might very well translate later into longer-term relationships.

Our analyses raise important questions regarding the nature of social activities in online games and the role they can play in fostering the creation and maintenance of communities. We begin below with a discussion of the role of space in promoting sociability online.

6.1. VIRTUAL SPACE, REAL PROBLEMS

6.1.1. *Urban planning in SWG*

As we mention above, MMOGs differ from earlier online social spaces in their “physicality.” Beyond simple text-based communication tools, online games offer to their players a rich 3D environment that both enables and constrains activities. SWG is a very strong attempt at using space in strategic ways to encourage player-to-player interaction. In choosing to impart a strong sense of space to their game universe, however, it seems SWG’s designers have run into issues that already plague the real world: urban planning, virtual or physical, is difficult to do right.

Indeed, as we saw earlier, the efforts of players to create their own sociable events tend to be frustrated in the end with the difficulty of drawing a crowd out to the cantinas in their player cities. This is fundamentally an urban planning problem. Because they are relegated to the suburbs, player cantinas cannot attract any incidental foot traffic. Instead, such player-hosted events would be more successful if players could hold them in the big-city centers, such as Coronet City or Theed. Location is crucial for the success of third places as Oldenburg emphasizes:

“As important as timing, and closely related to it, is the location of third places. Where informal gathering places are far removed from one’s residence, their appeal fades” (Oldenburg, 1989, p. 33).

Game designers should consider ways of supporting player-hosted events in a game world’s major cities. Not only will proximity to transportation hubs, banks and markets help would-be third places attract more people, but the creative socializing of players will make the major cities much more interesting places than they currently are.

Very interestingly, SWG illustrates that while modeling online spaces after real-life spaces can help immersion and ease of orientation, mistakes in urban planning can also be reproduced. With the hard separation of player cities from major cities, SWG’s designers in many ways reproduced Los Angeles, or what Oldenburg (1989, p. 3) calls the “automobile suburb,” in which people must commute considerable distances between the places where they live, work and play. As virtual worlds evolve, it will be interesting to see how

principles of urban planning in the real world may or may not transfer online. Perhaps “virtual urban sociologists” will become an essential part of game design teams.

6.1.2. *When space is not really spatial: physical layout of the cantinas*

Beyond world-scale design issues, the organization of local spaces can also have important consequences for sociability in games. Earlier in this paper we described the cantina’s atmosphere, and what appears to be at first sight a faithful reproduction of the seedy establishments portrayed in the movies. Yet for all its visual richness, the cantina remains a surprisingly impoverished communication space. Indeed, the entire building is managed as a single conversational space: any utterance typed in the “spatial” channel can be heard by anyone in the cantina, whether they are at the bar, in one of the side alcoves, or in the offices at the back.

By itself this could be seen only as a minor issue, simply affecting a player’s suspension of disbelief. But in SWG the problem is compounded by the interdependencies introduced by the game’s design. Indeed, our data shows that some transactions that can be conducted at maximum efficiency only in these spaces (e.g. grinding, advertising) tend to dominate any other possible social activities. The cantina cannot be easily partitioned by the visitors based on the kinds of social activities they would like to engage into: there is no way to move away from the “noise” of the main floor to a quieter alcove or backroom, for instance. In other words, the cantina cannot be easily transformed to support a different conversational setting than what was intended by the designers (Harrison et al., 1993). Alternate definitions of the place collide and conflict: “AFK macro-ers” and live entertainers have a different understanding of what the appropriate behavior is, but they have to share the same public channel. Ultimately, the most vociferous users tend to dominate the space and players running a macro are the most visible. But a different, more flexible organization of space could have let them both cohabit more peacefully. Previous research has shown that users can use space to their advantage when interacting with each other, provided the system provides ways to naturally and effortlessly form and re-form subgroups as needed – for instance by introducing a “hearing range” (Viegas and Donath, 1999).

In fact, the problem described above can have even more dramatic repercussions. Since players cannot use the local organization of space to partition their activities, they have to resort to the only available alternative: private chat. The only real way to have a “quiet” conversation in the cantina is to exchange private “tells” with the other visitors. But private tells, by their very nature, are completely antithetical to the notion of a public space: nothing can be overheard, no indications of the level of interactivity are visible, no serendipitous exchanges can be had. By being shared “too much,” the cantina’s conversational space can end up not being shared at all.

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Another problem in SWG’s social spaces is awareness. Awareness is defined as “the knowledge of the presence of other people, including their interactions and other activities” (Dourish and Bellotti 1992). In heavily populated online spaces, which people one should be made aware of and how this should be done are important questions (Lee et al., 2001). People need to know if others are really present if they are to interact with them.

Right now, due to the prevalence of macroing, it is hard to judge who is really available for interaction in SWG. This was clearly reflected in our participants’ comments in Section 5.3. More importantly, it is even harder to know who is available for *what kind* of interaction. Again, some players are quite content to have short, instrumental interactions while others are interested in more sociable encounters. Interaction enablers (Isaacs et al., 1996), based on a player’s profile, can be used to jumpstart interactions. SWG already offers ways for the players to differentiate themselves based on the interactions they seek: they can label their avatar as a “role player” or “newbie helper,” for instance. They can also fill up a player profile and a bio. While we saw evidence during our ethnographic observations that bios and labels are used frequently, they break down in heavily populated places like the cantina or the starport. Indeed, to access this information, one needs to click serially on each player and then examine his or her profile.

6.2. SOCIABILITY AND “THE GRIND”

It is clear from our analyses that cantinas are not entirely successful at encouraging sociability. While sociability may be diffused in other times and places in the game, we think the limitations of places like the cantinas can partly explain one phenomenon we observed: players constantly “grinding” for experience points. In the real world, Oldenburg proposed that:

“When the settings for casual socializing are not provided in the neighborhood, people compensate in the workplace. [...] once clear parameters separating work from play become confused. The individual finds that neither work nor play are as satisfying as they should be” (Oldenburg, 1989, pp. 12–13).

In other words, the large number of grinders and “AFK macro-ers” in SWG might not be the cause of the lack of sociability in cantinas: they might be the victims of the diffuse nature of sociability in the game. Indeed when it is difficult to reliably find a place to “wind down” during or after a gaming session, the temptation is high to simply focus on the game’s instrumental objectives. It could be that if socializing was better supported and rewarded, some of these instrumental players would prefer interacting with other players.

More generally, we think the problems experienced by the cantinas of SWG reflect an important tension inherent to multiplayer games: namely, the tension between instrumental and social play. Online games are social spaces created around joint, goal-directed activities. In this they resemble team sports and, even more closely, pick-up sports (Jimerson, 1999). Players simply enter the game, look for compatible players, and structure their interactions around the activities offered by the game (e.g. hunting creatures, gathering resources, etc.). These pre-packaged activities are important since they constitute resources for talk: there is always something to talk about in a MMOG, even if it is something as simple as the last creature killed or where to go next (Brown and Bell, 2004). The game environment provides a form of “triangulation” (Whyte, 1988) mediating and bootstrapping interactivity among the players. But while this aspect of MMOGs is an important resource, it is also a constraint. Indeed the instrumental nature of the activities forming the backbone of player-to-player relationships may not support the formation of longer-lasting, deeper ties between them. Indeed our data shows that, much like Muramatsu and Ackerman’s (1998) early research results on the nature of social activity in gaming, “activity on a system can be social without being sociable.” Manninen also pointed out that, in multiplayer games, “instrumental and strategic actions have dominance over other action types” (Manninen, 2003). While they were clearly designed with the hope of moving beyond this limitation, the cantinas of SWG were still built around an instrumental activity (healing battle fatigue and getting mind buffs). This leads to a conflict between instrumentality and sociability.

Since the early days of MUDs, designers have known that each player approaches a multiplayer game with a different orientation (Bartle, 1996; Taylor, 2003). “Power gamers” and “achievers” have a focus on efficiency, on progressing the fastest in the game. Although they are far from asocial (see Taylor, 2003), they are probably not the ones interested in hanging out in cantinas, chatting with other players – instead, they use a macro to “grind” through levels as fast as possible. “Socializers,” on the other hand, are interested in the company of others for its own sake (Simmel, 1949) – sharing a good time is what matters. These conflicting objectives collide head-on in a place like the cantina. Hence, we wonder if online games can ultimately cater simultaneously to these different profiles.

In SWG, the players themselves have addressed this issue by forming homogeneous subgroups. Some player-created cities, for instance, are designated “role-players only,” others are defined as mostly social, while yet another category focuses on combat. This is a simple workaround, allowing different player profiles to share the same game. In the main, non-player created cities (like Coronet City) however, such a partitioning is impossible. We think that it should be possible to restructure the game’s interaction

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system so that both instrumental and social players can be rewarded for their activities while sharing the same locations.

Based on our data, it is clear that macros are a double-edged sword that designers need to consider carefully. When used to customize the interface and streamline certain activities, they can certainly be very helpful and appreciated by the players. They are also essential tools for the power gamers. However, if they allow a complete range of activities to be performed automatically, they can greatly affect social interactivity. Players are known to ruthlessly exploit any game feature to gain an edge and progress faster (Taylor, 2003). In the case of SWG, this often leads to a simple automation of most tasks, even interactions with others.

In this respect we think SWG’s macro system can be almost too powerful. In particular, for the service-oriented professions, it would make sense to check if a player is sitting in front of the screen to interact with others while his avatar loops through scripted behaviors. Players could be rewarded for actively controlling their avatar instead of “AFK macroing,” for instance by gaining more experience points for “live” play. The most important point is this: right now, even in games trying to support social interactions like SWG, progress is still tied to the accomplishment of instrumental actions. Entertainers, for instance, progress by healing battle fatigue – a concept simply expressed by having a large number of people clicking “watch” on the entertainer. Since this can be easily automated, there is no point in trying to put together a good performance: one can let the avatar mindlessly accumulate experience points with a macro. Instead, incentives and rewards could be to be built in the game to reward live, social interaction.

To achieve this, we think game designers could probably use social interactivity data to great effect. For our study we used public, easily accessible information. This already helped us understand in-game social activity better and identify problems. In the cantina for instance, simply measuring the number of gestures received is a good way of separating “live” entertainers from those on a macro. Presumably game designers have access to a much larger data set, since they control the servers through which all game data transits. It would be easy for them, for instance, to compute measures of interactivity in all games locations. They could also analyze the social networks that each player is a part of (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Similar efforts are under way in the context of other online social environments (e.g. Donath et al., 1999; Sack, 2001; Smith and Fiore, 2001; Viegas and Smith, 2004), and Raph Koster described similar techniques at a recent Game Developers Conference (Koster, 2004). We think multiplayer games would greatly benefit from these approaches – indeed, they are built on and extend the possibilities of other online environments and could fruitfully reuse some of the earlier research on electronic media. All of this data could then be used to

appropriately reward “socializers” while still supporting more instrumental players.

6.3. VIRTUAL SOCIABILITY AS “EMPTY FARCE”?

While Simmel defines “sociability” as a kind of association in which the frictional relationships of real life are temporarily suspended, he nonetheless insists that sociability maintains connections to and even symbolizes real life. He warns that forms of association, such as the court society of the French aristocracy, that lose all “threads which bind it to real life” turn “from play to empty farce, to a lifeless schematization proud of its woodenness” (Simmel, 1949, p. 261). Thus, Simmel argues that sociability is a reprieve from the interests of real life, but is not entirely detached from them.

Is the association among players of virtual worlds “empty farce”? Brown (2005) argues “yes” when applying Simmel’s definition of sociability to the virtual world, *There*. Brown (2005) argues of *There* that “...its sociability lacks an orientation to an overall goal. There is no competition in *There*, or at least at the level of other online games. *There* loses a close connection with the competitive nature of much of the real world. Its design challenge then is to find a way of connecting its rich support for sociability with a “deep and true relationship to the world.” Brown thus equates a “connection to real life” with game mechanics. Virtual worlds, such as *There* and *Second Life*, provide users with a communication infrastructure, but not with a “game” or set of particular activities in which to engage (users must invent their own) as *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft* do, primarily through their combat and xp systems. As we argued above, the latter can promote sociability around game activities through “triangulation” (Whyte, 1988) much like poker or pick-up basketball can provide an activity framework for sociability.

SWG certainly includes game mechanics that always provide players with something to do. In fact, arguably SWG’s most impressive achievement is that it introduced new kinds of game mechanics than those of earlier MMOs. For example, in SWG, the developers created a game around socializing itself, rather than simply around combat. While “hanging out” socially in cantinas, players could earn xp and unlock new abilities as well as engage in other entertainer-related activities, such as performing and buffing. Each of these instrumental game activities insured that there was always something to do in the cantinas and gave the sociability in cantinas its distinctive form. In our opinion, this facilitated true sociability among a sub-group of players who played entertainers as well as among so-called role players who actively engaged in playful and lively conversation. However, when players treat the cantina as a battle fatigue “drive thru” or run their characters on looping macros while AFK, the result might indeed qualify as “empty farce.” Yet this

“lifeless schematization” derives not from a lack of goals but rather from purely instrumental play that disallows sociable interaction.

7. Conclusion: MMOGs and sociability

In this paper, we took a critical look at online gaming spaces designed specifically to promote sociability. Our analyses shed light on the role online games can play in what many scholars see as a general decline in social capital in the Western world (Putnam, 2000).

SWG shows that games offer social spaces that are with their own virtues and problems, not unlike the third places described by Oldenburg (1989). While it is true that a game, as a whole, can function in ways resembling the third places of the real world (see Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006), a more fine-grained analysis such as ours shows that a player’s experience can be greatly affected by the “social architecture” of its public places. In this respect it is interesting to note that, despite the incredible flexibility offered by digital worlds, game designers have nevertheless reproduced features of the physical environment that have a direct, negative bearing on the quality of social life in their game. This point is made very clear in SWG where a sprawling, low-density urban layout drives players away from the big cities’ social hangouts or, at a minimum, limits the time that can be spent in such places. The focus in current online games on progress and “leveling” is also at odds with the need for places where players can “wind down,” relax, and socialize with each other. In other words, the game’s social spaces can be easily invaded by a peculiar form of “game-work” (e.g. accomplishing missions and improving one’s character). This manifests itself in the form of very instrumental exchanges between the players, short visits, and a certain “perversion of leisure” anticipated by Oldenburg (1989): even in a virtual bar, it is hard to avoid being bombarded by a constant stream of advertisements for virtual goods and services.

Despite these important problems, SWG also shows that games can (and maybe should) be designed to be socially rewarding. The cantinas of our analyses were home to a significant number of socializers who gave a “human touch” to the game’s universe, provided entertainment for others, and established real relationships with other regulars present in the same virtual space. Beyond the constant noise from spammers, conversations between the players were often lively and humoristic, highlighting the role of the cantina as an environment where players could get away from “the grind” and form a different view of the individuals they were sharing the world with. In this respect SWG succeeded where others had failed: for the first time, a virtual bar in a game world was densely populated.

Based on our results, we believe online games are promising environments that could be designed to replace or, at the very least, supplement the third

places of the physical world. An entire generation of millions of young gamers (Woodcock, 2005) is using virtual worlds, and they are almost certainly more familiar with these virtual social spaces than with the corner bar or the bowling alley praised by Oldenburg (1989) and Putnam (2000). We have seen that most of the positive aspects of third places can be transferred to games, provided significant attention is paid to avoiding design pitfalls that have already been documented with physical places. We encourage designers to rely on the flexibility of digital environments to optimize a player's experience instead of reproducing an organization of space that might be familiar, yet alienating (see our earlier comparison between SWG and Los Angeles). Game design has become a social problem in its own right, and it is a domain where sociology could have much influence both by recommending best practices and evaluating the effects of virtual social environments on their visitors. We hope this paper will inspire future work in these promising areas.

Notes

1. <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com>
2. Others (Steinkuehler, 2005) have argued that MMORPGs *overall* fit Oldenburg's criteria for third places. While we agree with this, we take a somewhat different tack in this paper by focusing on *particular places within* virtual game worlds.
3. Note that recent evolutions in the game's design have changed the picture significantly. We emphasize that we are analyzing the initial incarnation of the game in this paper, not the highly modified version available these days.
4. Players accumulate this "battle fatigue" during combat sequences with creatures and enemies. A character's performance deteriorates as its battle fatigue increases.
5. There are 25 SWG servers available (not including the test center's server). Each hosts a self-contained galaxy – therefore, patterns of activity can differ between servers. However, informal interactions with players from other servers tell us that the phenomena we observed are widespread. In addition, as the mechanics of the game change over time with new updates, player behavior patterns change accordingly. As a result, our results may not hold beyond the period of observation.
6. Each server is home to 10 different planets. While the planets are the same on each server, players have appropriated them differently. On our server, for instance, Tatooine and Theed are heavily populated by role-players, while Corellia is home to more instrumental/hardcore players. We observed activity in Corellia and Theed to make sure our observations were not affected by the dominant player profile of a single planet.
7. It was impossible for us (lacking access to server-side data) to capture private chat messages among players, such as tells, group chat, and guild chat. Consequently our results underreport sociability in SWG's cantinas to some degree. However, we do not feel this is a fatal methodological error for three reasons: (1) our ethnography revealed that there were not major levels of sociable chat occurring privately in cantinas, (2) all gesture and custom emotes are public, and (3) we are primarily interested in the public social atmosphere.
8. Recall that experience points or "xp" is a near-universal mechanism in MMOGs, used to measure a character's progress in the game. XP can be spent to improve a character's attributes, e.g. his fighting skills. The more XP you earn, the faster you progress in the game.

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9. One interesting form of socializing we observed is “role playing” or simply “RPing.” When RPing, players try to say and do only things that their character would say or do (see Squire and Steinkuehler, In press). This involves minimizing talk about “out of character” topics and marking it as such, with “OOC,” when it is necessary. Cantinas and the entertainer professions were particularly popular among role players.
10. “lol” is a ubiquitous shorthand meaning “laugh out loud.”
11. “leet dewds” is a form of “hax0r” speak (see for instance <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hax0r>), meaning “elite dudes.” It is used to refer derisively to highly instrumental players who focus on accomplishing game objectives the fastest way possible. Such people are stereotyped as constantly using “hax0r” shorthand among themselves.

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