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Eric Gordon and Gene Koo

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Placeworlds

Using Virtual Worlds to Foster Civic Engagement

Eric Gordon

Emerson College

Gene Koo

Harvard Law School



This article describes a pilot program in Boston, Massachusetts, that incorporates virtual worlds into the urban planning process. The authors argue that the immersive, playful, and social qualities of the virtual world Second Life are uniquely appropriate to engage people in dialogue about their communities. By sharing experiences of a planned space and having the opportunity to deliberate over, comment on, and alter that space, previously disempowered individuals are able to form politically powerful groups. This takes place through the formation of what the authors call placeworlds, a subgroup of the Habermasian lifeworld that is organized around the shared understanding of place. Second Life and similar virtual world platforms offer profound possibilities for how local communities can imagine themselves as political actors in the face of global and homogenizing political systems.

Keywords: virtual worlds; civic engagement; urban planning; participatory media; Boston; Habermas; lifeworld; Second Life

We may say that our deeply-loved places are not necessarily visible. . . . Human places become vividly real through dramatization.

—Tuan (1977, p. 178)

As the mechanisms that shape lived spaces retreat deeper into corporate and extralocal government bureaucracies, the power to create “vividly real” places slips further out of the reach of the inhabitants of those spaces. American cities, at the intersection of

myriad financial interests and government jurisdictions, exemplify this systemic disempowerment of inhabitants. Communities that lack financial, political, and cultural capital are often excluded from decision making, planning, and design of their own social spaces, leaving them the object of external interventions. And with outsiders focusing overwhelmingly on urban neighborhood crises, the more subtle functions of those neighborhoods' street corners, park benches, front porches, bus stops, sidewalks, and retail shops—the places where everyday life takes shape—are too often characterized as superfluous to the systemic problems of urban life. When systems are in need of repair, the places that exist within are invisible.

As a means of enabling communities to express their own visions of public and civic space, we have launched a program that looks to an unlikely tool to aid in the production of vividly real places: online virtual worlds. The program is called Hub2, and our goal is to strengthen the ability of neighborhood residents to create meaningful places. Multi-user virtual environments (MUVES) enable local groups to strengthen their experience and expression of place by offering a unique language of space. Our program intends to exploit the power of that language to forge and project community aspirations for public places. We have chosen a platform called Second Life (SL)—an entirely user-created virtual world where avatars dance, play, go to live events, attend classes, and shop. SL enables (indeed, requires) its users to code its architecture and create its content, providing a sandbox for Hub2 participants to reimagine their physical environment by constructing spaces communally and collaboratively.

Thus, Hub2 primarily aims to nurture local communities that can (a) understand and analyze what makes public places precious to them; (b) rationally deliberate over the design of public spaces; and (c) powerfully assert their communal vision within the larger democratic dialogue. We do this through a sequence of physical meetings that include virtual charrettes. Unlike a traditional community charrette, where participants are asked to draw and discuss uses for spaces, Hub2 participants both imagine and collectively experience their design, made possible through a 3D MUVE that doubles as a powerful 3D design tool. Building on recent efforts that use MUVES to foster collaborative design (Childress & Braswell, 2006; Noveck, 2006), Hub2 pays particular attention to the social and communal dimensions of the collaborative design processes: For these efforts to succeed, we believe they must engage not just discrete individuals but coherent groups capable of taking action together. In short, we believe that the greatest promise of a new language of space resides in offering communities new ways to deliberate about and forge communal identities around reimagined visions of space.

The Hub2 initiative in the City of Boston, our pilot city, completed its first phase in the form of two experimental classes at Emerson College during the autumn 2007 semester. This pilot gave us our first test of the ideas outlined in this article and pinpointed places where practice diverged from theory. In the course of these pilot classes, participants (a) investigated the public spaces they currently occupy and reimagined them to overcome identified problems; (b) collaboratively designed a social space in SL that responded to those challenges abstractly, that is, without modeling an actual blueprint; (c) inhabited the virtual design to test its social functionality; and (d) imported their learning back into their physical lives through reflection in the form of blog posts, videos, or podcasts. Although SL evokes our daily experience of space, it is still far from “real,” and our goal was to exploit that gap to enable critical reflection about real spaces. We also hoped that the playful nature of SL would enable participants to imagine the possibilities of social spaces in ways that wouldn't be possible through traditional modes of representation. In what follows, we outline

our theory of collaborative places and discuss why this model is appropriate and necessary for the democratic participation in the design of urban neighborhoods. We then discuss how this theory was tested in our two pilot courses. And we conclude by offering a preliminary account of the next phase of the project that will more fully integrate MUVes into the community engagement process.

Forming Placeworlds

Place is experienced space (Malpas, 1999; Tuan & Mercurio, 2004). It is what happens when geographic space takes on meaning of any sort—as an object of memory, desire, or fear. Place can be produced through happenstance (the space of a first kiss), through narrative (the space of childhood that is persistently articulated with story), through familiarity (the space one lives each day), or through representation (the space of art or advertising). This identification with place is an important method of organizing personal experience and social actions.

As places signify for the individual, placeworlds matter to social groups. We coin the term *placeworlds* to delineate a subset of Habermas's "lifeworlds," the lived experience of people who understand and accommodate each other. Lifeworld describes the ability for groups to share and build on a common understanding of "who we are" (Friedland, 2001) through the cultivation of a sense of common goals and purpose.¹ If a lifeworld comes into being when a group of people arrives at a mutual understanding of something, a placeworld arises when people come to a mutual understanding of some *place*. Given the importance of places to our lives and identities, most lifeworlds do, in fact, exist in physical spaces, although they are not necessarily placeworlds.

Places become placeworlds when their inhabitants imbue them with meaning through *communicative action*—the reasoned deliberation, with the goal of mutual understanding, that animates all lifeworlds. Whether a street corner, a favorite hangout, a neighborhood, or a playground, places are particularly well-suited for establishing common purpose among groups of people. Placeworlds are more persistent than places alone—whereas place is simply experienced space (individually or collectively), a placeworld is formed when a group brings a place into shared relevance. When a community organizes to preserve a park where the city aims to build a parking lot, they gather and deliberate over a given space and form shared understandings of themselves in relation to that space. This is a placeworld. When youth gather downtown to see and be seen, they create a shared understanding of that space's function. Consciously or not, they have all contributed to defining the rules and norms of the space and have arrived at a common understanding of its meaning. This, too, is a placeworld. Placeworlds matter for a group's sense of purpose, social status, and ability to organize as a political actor.

The mission of Hub2 is to foster and sustain placeworlds by creating the conditions for focused and deliberative communicative action. Hub2 enables communities to reach a common understanding of the spaces they occupy as an expression of their shared experience, values, and vision, specifically, by providing the technological tools that enable rational deliberation about space and a careful process to frame that deliberation. Place can function as the most powerful organizing theme of shared meaning. Street corners and neighborhoods, parks and schools, monuments and memorials—these are not just spots on a map. They are what hold the abstraction of social life together. And yet, many believe that place as an organizing principle for communities and civic life is in rapid retreat.

Our Last, Great Places?

Placeworlds require constant attention; without tending, they, like memories and experiences, retreat into the mundane stuff of everyday life. Each individual and group, Habermas argues, exists on the seam between lifeworld and system, and systems are inexorably colonizing the lifeworld. Manuel Castells has made similar claims about the anachronistic insularity of place, suggesting that networks have transformed experienced space into an obsolete organizing principle of social life and, we would add, the civic life that takes root there.

Castells (1996) argues that networks have become the primary mode of organization in advanced societies. The traditional structuring logic of society, built around the formation of groups and crowds, has given way to a network society that is organized around relations and flows.

Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in the processes of production, experience, power, and culture. While the networking form of social organization has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm provides the basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure. (p. 469)

By this account, physical spaces and bodies are no longer central to the social formation of civil society. In what Castells (1996) calls the “space of flows,” the strategic positioning of information streams has replaced corporate headquarters and national capitols as the arbiter of social and political power. The space of flows has transcended the space of places, “whose form, function and meaning are self-contained within the boundaries of physical contiguity” (p. 423). By removing places from the social equation, Castells creates a binary opposition between what he calls “the Net” and the “the Self.” This is another way of stating that modern societies create a subject increasingly alienated from the spaces of everyday life. Any group that requires a clear sense of place for its cohesiveness is rendered ineffective, putting traditional methods of organization, including localism, nationalism, labor movements, and even political parties, into crisis (Van Dijk, 1999).

A decline of locality-bound groups would represent a significant threat to the civic society that emerges from them. As observers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam have recognized, such associations function as “schools for democracy,” where individuals learn the skills necessary to identify and organize around their shared interests, join their voices together in potentially powerful ways, and perhaps most important, understand and reciprocate among diverging opinions (Putnam, 2000). If civic society rests at the heart of the lifeworld, then associations are where people engage in the communicative action that thrums through it.

Denuding the United States of its groups would also strike at the underlying assumptions of American deliberative democracy, within which, for all its valorization of individual rights, isolated citizens lacking wealth or fame wield very little political power (Guttman, 1998). Parallel to Castells’s observation that the space of flows is replacing geographically defined groups, Putnam documents a decline in civic life. Indeed, among the factors that have “killed” civic engagement, Putnam attributes some small but significant portion of blame to suburban sprawl, in particular in the way that a growing distance between work, home, and commerce disrupts community “boundedness” and, therefore, its capacity to generate social capital.

The Abiding Importance of Place

At first glance, it would appear that digital networks have completed the rational systemization of the lifeworld that urban decentralization undertook. As John Perry Barlow (1996) announced in "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," "Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live." To an even greater extent than Castells could have predicted in 1996, when he wrote the first volume of *The Age of Information*, digital networks render society into a web of relationships. Individuals and spaces make up networks, but the primary organizing function of networks remains the relation between the nodes that populate them. "For the first time in history," Castells (1996) claims, "the basic unit of economic organization is not a subject, be it individual or collective . . . the *unit is the network*" (p. 196).

Yet, the rise of networks does not, in fact, signal the fall of places. It turns out that the very stuff of society is not the space of flows. "Society will consist of individuals, groups/pairs and organizations," Jan Van Dijk (1999) argues. "Of course they form external and internal relations, but these relations do not equal society" (p. 133). For Van Dijk, places, individuals, groups, and organizations still have meaning and influence, even as they also integrate into increasingly complex communicative structures. Indeed, as an empirical matter, the network has not triumphed over groups, points out Yochai Benkler (2006):

We now have quite a bit of social science research on the side of a number of factual propositions. Human beings, whether connected to the Internet or not, continue to communicate preferentially with people who are geographically proximate than with those who are distant. Nevertheless, people who are connected to the Internet communicate more with people who are geographically distant without decreasing the number of local connections. (p. 364)

In other words, a networked society can both encourage flows and reinforce places.

Networks need not degrade, nor merely coexist with, but can augment the capacity of a place to form meaning. Groups that form around common spaces—neighborhood organizations, for instance—increasingly use online networks to facilitate that place-making as well as extend the idea of that place into broader contexts for the purpose of enhancing political, social, or economic influence. iBrattleboro.org exemplifies the power that the idea of place can garner within networks. This community Web site for Brattleboro, Vermont, has been remarkably successful in influencing government decisions on local and state issues as well as organizing and maintaining community identities. The site first gained prominence with the local media and political establishments in 2003 when users successfully rallied to save 31 acres of local woodlands by inundating the media with testimonies. In 2004, when the site's developers learned that the town was investing \$250,000 in the renovation of a small park, they invited site members to join them at the park to assess whether or not the town was getting its money's worth. At the time of the meeting, the director of renovations was waiting for them with maps and charts to justify the project's budget. Because of the strength of the group, the onus of responsibility shifted from the community to the developer. In Benkler's (2006) words, networks "thicken" traditional relationships even as they transform them (p. 357).

Net-Locality: The Intersection of Places and Flows

Networks and places interpenetrate. When places transform their lived geography into an organizing principle for a network, they exhibit networked locality, or *net-locality*. The idea of locality, even when unbound from physicality, has become a powerful mechanism for group identification (Gordon, 2007). Consider Facebook, one of the largest and fastest growing social-networking sites on the Web. On one hand, this Web site epitomizes space of flows: It organizes friends into networks and represents them as a constant data stream. Yet, at the same time, many of these networks are built around vibrant physical places, often colleges. Thus, a student posting pictures from a dorm party includes faraway friends in the event while simultaneously reinforcing ties among dormmates. This weaving of a distributed network with physical place illustrates net-locality. Facebook and its ilk (Outside.in, Placeblogger.org, Frontporchforum.com, etc.) reify traditional relationships built in physical spaces, while at the same time projecting the concept of physical connectivity into the space of flows.

So, locality matters. It matters because people have bodies and bodies are always located. But it also matters because the very idea of location offers a counterpoint (whether discordant or harmonious) to disembodied networks. As computing goes mobile, and location technologies such as global positioning systems (GPS), geographic information systems (GIS), and Google Earth appear in phones and other handheld devices, the space of flows intertwines with the space of places. Ubiquitous computing rationalizes places into systems, transforming them into data points on a map. Even so, place reasserts itself in the space of flows through net-locality. For instance, people often ask callers on a mobile phone, "Where are you?" just as early users of chatrooms inquired "ASL" (age, sex, location). Conversely, the space of flows is also present in places: Neighborhood organizers often use e-mail, listservs, online groups, and blogs to bolster physical ties. Net-locality functions as the ligament joining places with flows.

Net-locality thus facilitates the production of placeworlds in the context of a networked society. Placeworlds emerge from communicative action about a given place. They are always the product of groups, and they always result in a "common understanding" of place. Contrast the "smart mob," which deconstructs places into objects of a fleeting game: Participants suddenly descend on locations-as-data and just as quickly break apart (Rheingold, 2002). By holding communities together around a common understanding of place, placeworlds sustain those places against the deconstructive power of flows. Net-locality also enables placeworlds to remain inwardly focused without becoming insular. Individuals bring in their own outside references, prior understandings, and networks of information to the placeworlds they inhabit. Thus, the placeworld, although a product of located and deliberative communication, always looks outward through its constitutive members, without losing sight of where it actually is.

Placeworlds, Virtual Worlds, and Bowling Together

The interpenetration of networks and places explains our otherwise counterintuitive interest in virtual worlds as the platform for the Hub2 project. We believe that such technologies offer a powerful means for neighborhoods and other physically bound communities to extend placeworlds into flows of potentially worldwide reach. Four characteristics draw us to virtual worlds: immersion (capacity to articulate a

place), group formation (capacity to transform places into placeworlds), constructive ownership (capacity to modify those placeworlds to suit the practical or expressive needs of the group), and imaginative playfulness (bias toward experimentation).

Immersion. By mimicking physical spaces through 3D graphics and spatial physics, virtual worlds are more accessible as social spaces to more people. Many of their current inhabitants would agree with Richard Bartle (2006) when he insists, "They're not games, they're places."² Although they offer only a fraction of the "emotional bandwidth"³ of face-to-face interaction, virtual worlds' growing graphical power, increasing use of live voice chatting, and expanding emotive capabilities⁴ provide a far richer social environment than basic text with pictures and emoticons. The avatar as navigational tool provides users with a point of identification that extends their sense of presence into the virtual environment and creates a strong sense of being with others. When avatars congregate, they often perform the social rituals that guide real-world interactions—they sit, they face one another when talking, they respect personal distance.

Group formation. All of this immersion matters not just for the individual experience but for the group. "A group aspires to do something in the world. It is an intentional collective that creates a sense of belonging to something that manifests a shared purpose" (Noveck, 2006). And as Beth Noveck points out, because they enable avatars to synchronously share representations of space, 3D virtual worlds bias toward group activities. In fact, game-oriented virtual worlds do challenge the anomie of "bowling alone." The social organization of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) is a vigorous civic society of associations and lived spaces, even if virtual ones. The mechanisms whereby most popular MMOs generate social capital would be instantly familiar to Putnam: voluntary associations of players who band together to achieve collective goals. MMO guilds put the "action" into "communicative action": Beyond meeting and talking, they also strategize, execute plans, succeed or fail at these plans, and distribute the rewards among themselves. In all of this, they demand commitment of their members. These guilds are so robust that they evoke characteristics of organized crime syndicates for Jakobsson and Taylor (2003). Their comparison between EverQuest and the mafia, although not flattering, highlights the currencies of social capital—reputation, trust, and responsibility—that also define civic associations, as Putnam recognizes when he acknowledges street gangs as part of civic life. Thus, if first-generation Web communities seem poor substitutes for placeworlds, perhaps it is due as much to their feeble and porous group identities and limited scope of group action as their lack of embodied 3D presence.⁵

Constructive ownership. It struck us that if MMOs could foster civic life around synthetic and often fantastical places, virtual worlds in general must hold tremendous and largely untapped potential to "thicken" civic life around existing physical places. Their spatial metaphors appear naturally suited to supporting location-aware groups, as Noveck (2006) observes:

By reintroducing the concept of space, groups and communities can cohere around specific locations. It may turn out that in the second-generation Internet, community once again comes to be defined by space. In all virtual worlds, groups develop their own themed spaces where they congregate. . . . As in the real world, place becomes relevant to group formation. (p. 267)

Of course, MMO games exist primarily because their game worlds demand group action to complete quests and defeat challenges. And although SL is not a game, at least no more so than is a rubber ball, the inherent playfulness imbued by its relation to MMOs creates similar contexts for group formation. However, the software and legal architecture of the virtual world Second Life encourage a different activity from quest completion: building.

Building offers a mode of communicative action that opens places themselves for discussion, a language that professional designers have historically controlled through technical processes and specialized knowledge. By contrast, SL building tools are accessible to laypersons, yet remarkably robust. What's more, all virtual worlds, being man-made, open for revision not just spaces but also the forces that animate or bound them; they subject even the laws of physics to amendment. Consequently, they offer ideal testbeds for experimenting with social relations (Bradley & Froomkin, 2004). Thus, when Hub2 invites communities to reimagine the places they inhabit, everything is potentially on the table. The new visions of community we hope to inspire include not just redesigned buildings but reconfigured relations of power.

Playfulness, not precision. Hub2, unlike traditional design processes, stimulates the spirit of play to imagine new possibilities. Hub2 invites communities to propose new designs, but the program focuses on helping participants articulate aspirations, and the values undergirding those aspirations, rather than arriving at implementable design. (Whatever the realism of SL, it is certainly not adequate to drafting working blueprints.) This extension from real to virtual generates a dialogue between the two that establishes the net-locality necessary to extend placeworld into the virtual. The dialogue parallels the tension between what is and what could be that virtual worlds often stimulate. Play challenges the imagination by presenting "what-ifs," alternate realities that might well be more perfect than the real ones. Hub2 hopes to use the spirit of play to enable participants to imagine those what-ifs.

A Second Life for Placeworlds: The Big IDEA

Every one is degraded, whether aware of it or not, when other people, without consulting him, take upon themselves unlimited power to regulate his destiny.

—Mill (1991, p. 329)

The preceding discussion suggests an ambitious agenda for Hub2. We seek to help communities strengthen the placeworlds they inhabit. We intend Hub2 participants to build a common vision together, using virtual worlds as a construction kit of both physical and social design. And we hope that the outcome of all this collaborative building will be more than just static statements of community aspiration but will also extend placeworlds into the space of flows through net-locality. Restated, we envision Hub2 communities amplifying their power by using their collaboratively designed spaces to mobilize larger networks than they can currently access.

HUB2 PROJECT OBJECTIVES

As a result of Hub2, we intend for participants to

- formulate working theories to explain observed similarities or differences between how individuals interact with physical and virtual spaces;
- hypothesize key features and characteristics of spaces that make them more or less compelling for facilitating social relationships;
- identify assets and deficits in the public spaces they occupy;
- imagine and construct a virtual space that extends the power of their communities in response to identified failures of their physical spaces;
- use language about spaces and personal knowledge about communities to articulate a new vision for physical and virtual spaces.

HUB2 PROJECT CURRICULUM

In its first iteration, Hub2 took the form of two courses at Emerson College: one with undergraduate and graduate students, and the other open to the community outside of the college, including community activists and city employees. Because of this initial setting, we designed the Hub2 methodology as a curriculum, which we summarize with the acronym IDEA: Imagine, Design, Engage, and Activate.

Imagine. In the first phase of the course, participants explored spaces in order to reimagine them. We asked them to go out into an existing space to conduct simple ethnographic observations. In taking on the researcher's disposition, they were given permission to ask "why" questions about spaces that have perhaps become unreflectively familiar. They watched what people did, how often they did it, where they congregated, where they stood, and where they moved. They talked to people to get a sense of why they did certain things and not others, and what elements of the space were lacking or unsatisfactory and what elements were most interesting. The group then reassembled to share what they learned and to discuss how the space functioned: what has worked and what didn't. The point was not to immerse the participants in professional planning or architectural discourse; instead, it was to encourage participants to look specifically at how the physical environment constructs the social environment.

Then, participants repeated this process in the world of SL. They watched how avatars occupied space, what they did, and for what reason. By contrasting the real with the virtual, participants drew out the nature of social engagement: similarities and contrasts in how people talked, engaged in group projects, moved from place to place, and occupied spaces. Through discussion and presentation, participants explored the social dynamics in each space and arrived at their own conclusions about the productive gaps between them.

Within those gaps, participants collectively imagined what an SL space might look like that addressed their concerns about the real space. For instance, one of the groups noticed that people just walked from one place to another without stopping, and they identified this transience as the biggest problem with the space. They concluded that food and drink were the most reliable mechanism for getting people to gather in public space. Because avatars don't need to eat or drink in SL, they began thinking about alternate ways of attracting groups, including activities, information posts, and existing crowds.

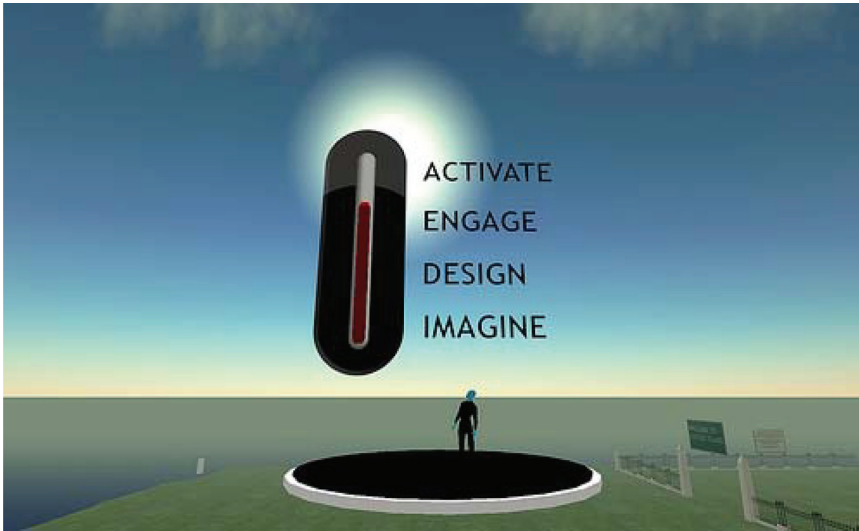


Figure 1. The IDEA Platform on Boston Island

Source: Screen capture by Eric Gordon. Permission granted.

Note: In Hub2, participants worked side-by-side in both physical and virtual space to build new designs together.

Design. In the next part of the process, participants drafted and executed a single design of an SL space. We chose SL as a platform because its code and legal architectures encourage building for novice users. The software includes a simple but powerful building tool that does not require proficiency in external CAD or animation programs, which may overcome the difficulty of incorporating virtual environments into traditional community design processes (O’Coill & Doughty, 2004). Besides, our goal wasn’t for participants to produce a realistic blueprint for real-world implementation, although SL’s realistic graphics sufficiently evoke real-world places.

More important than the software’s capacity to model physical space, SL enables synchronous, collaborative building in a realistic environment. When users build landscapes or objects in SL, they do so situated in the environment through avatars, who stand nearby with a moving beam extending from their arm to connote the act of creation. Thus, SL puts the act of production into a shared virtual space, unlike most multimedia production. While building, users connect with one another through their avatars, discuss the process, or simply “hang out.” Furthermore, users who are sharing physical space (i.e., sitting next to each other in a computer lab) can experience a group process not before possible in collaborative computer work (Dekel & Herbsleb, 2007). Messages between avatars are punctuated by audible laughter in the room, conversations between people, and references to what’s happening onscreen. The ability to build a virtual space together in real space is potentially a powerful group experience as the intimacy of the virtual environment bleeds over into physical social dynamics.

Engage. During and following the design process, participants engaged with the space they were building in SL. They occupied the virtual space, invited others to use it, and experimented with its capacity to encourage social activity. The goal of this stage of the process was to reflect on the newly constructed space in the same manner



Figure 2. A Reimagining of Boston's City Hall Plaza

Source: Screen capture by Eric Gordon. Permission granted.

Note: One group reimagined Boston City Hall Plaza as a place where residents vote on rotating exhibitions of artwork.

that they observed spaces at the beginning of the workshop. We invited SL residents to occupy the newly constructed spaces, and the groups watched and asked questions as a means of determining the space's effectiveness in addressing the issues they identified at the beginning. They had the opportunity to annotate and reconstruct, but their attention was directed to learning from their successes and failures through group deliberation.

The goal of the engage phase was to enable participants to view both their real-life (RL) and SL spaces as if they were tourists. This brings attention to the constructed quality of the space and the relative ease by which social processes can be manipulated. It also highlights the conditions through which spaces become convincingly meaningful. For example, someone who has never been to Venice, Italy, can immediately recognize the representations of the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas as familiar. Many tourist sites exist virtually before they are encountered in real life. In other words, they depend on reexperienced place (Judd & Fainstein, 1999; MacCannell, 1976). This ranges from highly represented natural sites like Yosemite or the Grand Canyon to televisual spaces like the *Cheers* bar in Boston. In the case of the latter, the façade of the bar used in the popular television series' opening credits has become one of the city's major tourist destinations. The bar is familiar despite the fact that visitors haven't experienced it firsthand. Visiting the actual space of the bar serves to validate and recreate the televisual experience. It is deeply familiar, on one hand, and new and strange, on the other. Tourist sites, in this regard, become meaningful through cognitive dissonance. If they were too familiar, there would be no sense of discovery, and if they were too foreign, the meaning would be too difficult to access. Teasing out the tourist experience is important for this phase of the program in two important ways: It gets participants to understand the spaces they've created in SL as both foreign and familiar, and it begins



Figure 3. A Miniature Boston Conceived as a Playground

Source: Screen capture by Eric Gordon. Permission granted.

Note: Participants were sharing both the virtual space and the physical space of a computer lab.

the process of allowing them to use the SL space to amend, enhance, and extend the meaning of the RL space. In that respect, we intended that both the RL and SL spaces function like tourist attractions for participants. Perhaps, like a tourist attraction, a synchronous experience of the SL space provides a common bond for forging group identity, for example, as something to which the community can aspire. But, quite unlike a tourist experience that evaporates with its novelty, perhaps the SL space intertwines with the RL space to forge a new and continuous sense of place, for example, by integrating otherwise isolated or alienated members of the neighborhood. How this tension is resolved or leveraged depends on how participants choose to activate their new spaces.

Activate. The final step of the process was for participants to realize the resonance between their newly built SL spaces and their chosen RL spaces. They were tasked with articulating what the virtual space taught them about physical space. The group that created a “juried art space” as part of their virtual re-creation of Boston’s City Hall Plaza concluded that that kind of interactive space was absolutely necessary to assure the vibrancy of the physical space. These conclusions, which were based on the feedback they received during the engage phase, were articulated in a short video that juxtaposed images of the virtual and real spaces. Whereas some groups created videos, others produced blog posts or verbal presentations to activate their projects.

Whatever the method of activation, this phase of the process aimed to redirect the virtual social space back to the real spaces of everyday life by establishing net-locality for the group’s lived places. The groups were asked to articulate their conclusions to a specified audience that extends beyond itself. At the culmination of our pilot courses, we assembled government officials, urban developers, and neighborhood residents to view the projects. Each group decided how best to communicate not just a representation of a place but a representation of an active placeworld to this audience. In so

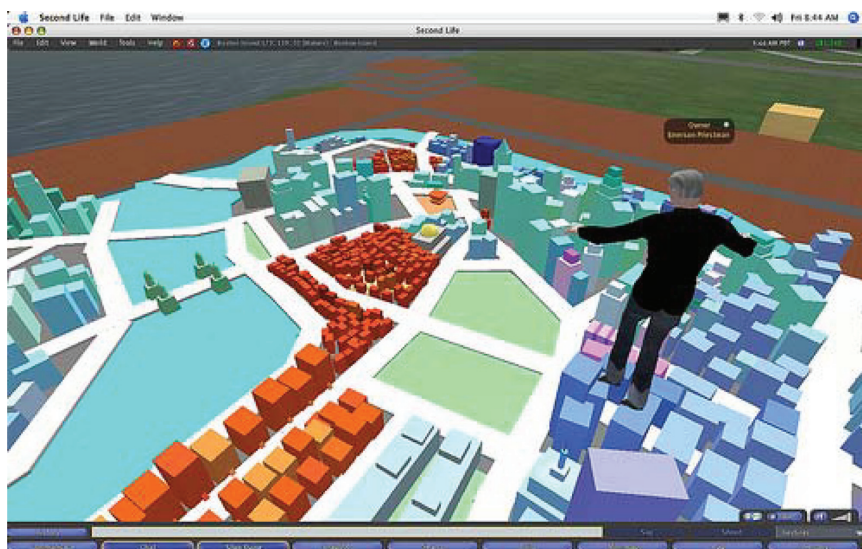


Figure 4. Flying Over Boston Island

Source: Screen capture by Eric Gordon. Permission granted.

Note: For the activate phase, the project teams presented their work to the mayor's office and we delivered a virtual key to the virtual city.

doing, they were able to harness the opportunity to share their placeworlds, identifying for themselves and communicating to others the importance of their shared places.

As Hub2 was designed as an intervention, and not a prolonged engagement with specific groups and issues, the program's success turns on its proper application of net-locality. After reaching a consensus design, groups should seek to engage deliberately with global digital networks by way of videos, blogs, podcasts, and so on, as a means to sustain their newly articulated placeworlds.

LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

This first iteration of the Hub2 program produced valuable outcomes and lessons learned that, in some cases, have forced us to rethink some of our operational assumptions. Preliminarily, we have reached the following tentative conclusions.

First, we found keeping the real and the fantastical in balance to be difficult if not untenable. On one hand, we asked participants to design a virtual space connected to a real public space. On the other hand, we knew that we wanted to expand participants' perceptions of what might be possible. We learned that to generate true community involvement, we needed to ground the project not just in a shared space but in a shared space where some kind of redesign and development was imminent. We also received feedback that the premium we put on the fantastical—that the presence of unicorns and flying machines would expand participants' sense of the possible—was overkill. For many of the participants, the very possibility of changing their very real physical environs was already fantastical. Thus, in our next iteration, we will focus more strongly on a pending development that would lend the program urgency without fretting too much about whether participants would have an imagination-expanding experience.

We also learned that the technology itself presents a formidable barrier, even with a relatively tech-savvy pilot group. We spent more time than expected on familiarizing participants with manipulating their avatars and environs, and only the more skilled students reached a useful level of proficiency with building. We've devised two responses to this issue in our next iteration. First, we will train and hire a set of youth to serve as "interpreters" between the technology and the less technically proficient participants. Second, we will provide participants with prefabricated objects that they can manipulate and move using simplified controls (similar to Tom Lowenhaupt and Jerry Paffendorf's work on the Landing Lights Park Project in Queens, New York). Thus, participants may, but need not, build the elements of the final design themselves. We will also supply virtual designers ("builders") who can rapidly model whatever ideas the participants come up with between design sessions. Although this somewhat limits what we originally viewed as the infinite possibilities of building in a virtual environment, we still see the Hub2 process as significantly more open than a typical charrette process.

Finally, we had nurtured some hope that the product of this work might itself become vital community spaces that extend and reinforce existing placeworlds. So far, this hope has been unrealized, mostly because so few people in any community can access SL but also because our initial participants were a fairly disjointed group hailing from disparate communities. Furthermore, even our student participants—who belonged to a common community and for whom access was not as significant an issue—did not create spaces that have fostered much participation. But this reflects the general use patterns of SL more than it reflects the quality of work produced. Virtual worlds can't claim the near ubiquitous access that has allowed the 2D Web, via desktop or mobile device, to augment so many of our physical places. Entire swaths of SL are empty for the vast majority of the time. But it turns out that we don't need people to continuously reside in these virtual spaces for them to serve an important function: Their role in the neighborhood can be much more episodic and focused on those moments when they offer strategic value (just as a listserv often erupts into life when something important happens within a community).

We continue to believe that MUEs provide significant affordances in facilitating democratic deliberation around physical design. As such, we believe that it is the responsibility of government and civic organizations to allocate resources for the development of practical social designs for these emerging technologies. Innovation in collaborative design should not be left to the private sector, where the Lear Center in Los Angeles and Starwood Hotels have already solicited SL designs for physical transformations. Of course, as is often the case with private enterprise, the focus of these projects was the final product and not the process. We echo Beth Noveck (2008) in claiming that the public sector can and should employ emerging technologies to innovate the process of democratic deliberation. As such, the program we're proposing for the second iteration of Hub2 would integrate virtual deliberation directly into the city's community design process and, we believe, provide frameworks for the production and sustainability of placeworlds.⁶

Conclusion

Hub2 seeks to move beyond the typical nondeliberative policy exercises that serve as the dominant definition of civic engagement. Civic engagement, as we understand



Figure 5. One of the Configurable Playground Elements in the “Toybox”

Source: Screen capture by Eric Gordon. Permission granted.

Note: “Rapid prototype” of a swing for a playground design to be used in the next phase of Hub2. Notice the arrows that participants can use to reposition the object.

it, is more than just voting in elections and offering input on whether or not a new park should be located in a community. Instead of being asked a yes-or-no question about the location of a park, communities should be able to discuss the benefits of open space and the variable functions of fields, playgrounds, art spaces, and so on. Public deliberation should happen at all levels of decision making, from conception to approval. Although we realize that this kind of civic engagement on a macro-social scale is unlikely, it can take place, to great benefit, within the context of a group. A small group can form to discuss the benefits of open space and the relative functions of playgrounds and fields. The group, not the yes-or-no vote, becomes the basic building block from which democracy is built.

As the design and patterns of inhabitation in urban spaces create the conditions for civic life, our particular concern is in mobilizing the group to facilitate thick engagement with urban spaces. The ideal manifestation of such a group results in what we call placeworlds—the sense of collective place that emerges from the conscious and deliberate discourse of a defined group of people. Placeworlds are formed through the internal dynamics of face-to-face interactions and collaboration and are reinforced through the network dynamics of data flows. We argue for the persistent importance of place even within the space of flows that continually gnaws at the centrality of geographic proximity. On one hand, the centrality of place is indicated in the near ubiquity of location-based software. From visualization tools like Google Earth and Virtual Earth, to social networking sites like Radar and Frappr, to information mapping sites like Placeopedia and Platial, places are increasingly beamed into networks. In these manifestations of net-locality, however, places often become mere data in networks

and are colonized by systems or seamlessly integrated into the space of flows. We argue that placeworlds, because of their reinforced connection to places through group deliberation, are not only better able to withstand the correspondence with the space of flows but rely on it for their relevance and longevity.

The personal identification with places is common. Placeworlds are less common because they require self-conscious group recognition of a place's meaning. We recognize these social formations as the foundation for productive civic engagement. Hub2 is an attempt to prioritize placeworlds for the democratic process and to reposition the rhetoric of civic engagement toward deliberative group action. But in understanding the importance of net-locality for effective civic engagement, and knowing that well-implemented technology is capable of facilitating deliberative agendas (Blumler & Coleman, 2001; Coleman & Götze, 2001; Morris, 2001), we decided that SL would provide the ideal platform to achieve our goals. Our decision to use SL for Hub2 was quite purposeful. Virtual worlds, and SL in particular, carry notable potential for altering group engagement with places (Noveck, 2006). Unlike the Web, SL allows users to immerse themselves in an environment and engage in synchronous dialogue and production with other graphically represented users. It allows for group authorship, which better enables a sense of collective ownership in a space or object.

When we're asked about Hub2, people often question why we would spend our time building a virtual Boston when the real Boston has so many problems. SL is a fascinating world unto itself, but in building and inhabiting its spaces, it reveals more about existing social worlds than it does about a virtual replacement of those worlds. And in affording its users the opportunity to build and play in a collaborative environment, it has the potential of generating politically viable groups around almost every element of our designed world.

Notes

1. The concept of lifeworld has a long history. It has phenomenological roots in Schutz and Husserl as an individually recognized form of "being in the world" or a kind of preinterpreted reality that can be subjectively grasped at any moment. Husserl suggests that every experiencing subject operates within a horizon that is constantly altered as perspectives change. What is natural and familiar within an individual's horizon at any given time is the lifeworld. Habermas (1987) takes issue with the phenomenological definition of this concept: "In the frame of the philosophy of consciousness," he argues, "the 'experiencing subject' remains the court of last appeal for analysis" (p. 130). Habermas's intervention repositions lifeworld away from the experiencing subject and toward the social situation. But situations are not sharply delimited. They come into relief by "themes and articulated goals and plans of action" (pp. 122-123).

2. Bartle, of course, includes text-based virtual worlds such as the multi-user dungeon (MUD) he invented among these places. Although we agree that such environments can indeed function as places, the point we're making here is not that 3D graphics are necessary or sufficient to sustain places but that more people will be inclined to see 3D spaces as places—and because places emerge from the subjective experience of people, that opinion matters.

3. This is a term coined by Mitch Kapur sometime in the early 1990s in *Tricycle Magazine* (see <http://www.kapor.com/writing/Emotional-Bandwidth.htm>).

4. The expressive capabilities of games have reached a point where artists have begun using game engines to render *machinima*—short films using virtual actors.

5. Successful online political activities often involve actions that can be completed online, for example, donating money to a cause or spreading MP3s as protest. Many that require offline

leverage are more difficult to accomplish; for example, online petitions alone have little effect on legislators' decision making (Coleman & Götze, 2001; Friedland, 2001; Gillmor, 2004).

6. Information about our current programs can be found at <http://hub2.org>.

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Gene Koo, JD, is a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society, where he researches and develops online and virtual tools for teaching, learning, and civic and moral development.

Eric Gordon is an assistant professor of new media at Emerson College in Boston. His work focuses on how digital networks are transforming popular conceptions of place, location, and urbanism.