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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World**

*Wagner James Au*

New York: Collins, 2008. Glossary, index, xxii, 274 pp. \$25.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780061353208.

### **Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality**

*Edward Castronova*

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Notes, index, xix, 235 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781403984128.

### **The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid That Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse**

*Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace*

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. Notes, illustrations, xvi, 295 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780262122948.

It has become commonplace in histories of computing to separate the uses of computers as calculating engines and thinking machines from their more widespread applications for communication, knowledge work, creativity, and information sharing. An eclectic

group of computer-science pioneers working in the 1960s, including J. C. R. Licklider, Douglas Engelbart, Ted Nelson, Ivan Sutherland, and Alan Kay, has received credit for shifting the emphasis from computational power to human use. A persistent aspect of the use of computers since the 1970s—alongside efforts to increase, augment, and extend human productivity—has been entertainment, and more specifically, play.

Human use of computers and related digital technologies for play and entertainment has followed a parallel track with applications for increasing productivity. Indeed, the argument could well be made that computer games and video games have produced some of the more compelling examples of human-machine symbiosis and efficient interface design. Another historical development in the use of computers—one less appreciated than the expansion from the calculating engine, but one also related to game technology—is the notion of

the computer as defining a *space*. Since the early 1990s, this notion comprises two key aspects of the use of computers and computer networks: place and presence. When we log on to computers, we become convinced that we are someplace and also that we “are there” with others. We commonly describe these spaces as virtual worlds.

The success of both game and social virtual worlds has led to publications about them from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. Three recent books—Wagner Au’s *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World*, Edward Castronova’s *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality*, and Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace’s *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid That Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse*—collectively seek to describe these virtual worlds and capture the experience of a growing society of players and virtual residents.

Linden Lab hired Wagner James Au in April 2003 to write about the virtual world it was then in the process of creating. A few months later, Linden Lab launched *Second Life*. Au became a self-described “embedded journalist” in the “new world” that is the subject of *The Making of Second Life*. He kept writing until early 2006, producing what he dubbed the “ongoing footnotes for my book” as posts

to a blog called New World Notes. These reports from *Second Life* continued beyond the term of his contract with Linden Lab; indeed, New World Notes remains an active blog today at <http://nwn.blogs.com/>. Despite the blog, Au’s relationship to Linden Lab changed, and with that change came one also in his avatar’s name from the inside journalist Hamlet Linden (recognized by the Linden surname) to the outside journalist Hamlet Au.

The shift in Au’s relationship to the developers of *Second Life* can be traced in the structure and narrative of his reportage, which Au calls the “epic story of an empire that exists inside a metal box” (p. 1). Roughly, the first third of the book focuses on the development of *Second Life*, offering many interesting insights into the ideas of the key personnel at Linden Lab: Philip Rosedale, the founder; Mitch Kapor, the major funder; and Cory Ondrejka, the chief technology officer. For readers of this journal, probably Au’s most important conclusion is that the original plan for what would become an “immersive, user-created online world” (p. 2) owed more to game worlds—MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and massively multiplayer games—than to Neal Stephenson’s vision of the “metaverse.” The design goal changed, influenced more in the end by Burning Man

(the anarchical festival held annually in Nevada's Black Rock Desert) than *Snow Crash* (Neal Stephenson's iconic sci-fi novel).

For the remainder of the book, however, Au delivers more anecdote than history, mostly stories about the *Second Life* "residents" who ended up primarily responsible for content creation and community growth. Au offers three concepts that guided his thinking: Bebop reality (essentially, the improvisational nature of creativity in *Second Life*); the impression society (how creativity is evaluated and valued in *Second Life*); and mirrored flourishing (that positive, in-world benefits should be reflected in real life). The third concept touches on issues that at least since Johann Huizinga have worried cultural theorists of play, namely, whether a play world is enclosed in a "magic circle" or open to the outside world. Unfortunately, both the historical and the conceptual narratives in *The Making of Second Life* are incomplete. Both with respect to Linden Lab and its background, the historical narrative lacks documentation, citations, and a coherent chronology. The book is organized around anecdotes that, on the whole, produce no compelling new argument about virtual worlds.

If Au's book is short on argument, Castronova's *Exodus to the Virtual World* is not. Considering his

academic background, it is perhaps surprising that he means to deliver a "work of speculative non-fiction" (p. xiii). The style is breezy, at times even light, but what places Castronova's account outside the usual scholarly boundaries is not that it is readable (which it is), but that it is speculative and predictive. The book discusses the future of virtual worlds, the appeal of play economies and politics in these worlds, and the likely blowback as more people "migrate" to these worlds, have fun in them, and begin to yearn for a real world organized along similar lines. In short, Castronova explores what we should expect when the qualities that draw people to virtual worlds begin to feed back to the real world and to change it.

For Castronova, what gives virtual worlds (he prefers the term synthetic worlds) their appeal and their impact is twofold. First, sociability "makes digital games a transformative technology" (p. 36). This is the legacy of games for virtual worlds, and the emerging civitas found in these worlds owes much to the formations and practices of the player communities associated with digital games. Second, Castronova not only explains why virtual worlds are fun for the people who play in them, but insists that they "are nothing but fun, by design" (p. 107). A major focus of the book, then, becomes what he calls a policy analysis of game design (part 2)

that produces fun. Their sociability and fun mean that virtual worlds are rife with politics and economics and design problems. Put another way, they are worlds that involve negotiations between the interests of players and the intentions of game developers.

Not surprisingly, Castronova frames virtual worlds in terms taken from real-world politics. One chapter is devoted, for example, to recasting design decisions as the policies of a synthetic government of traditional ministries. This leads to an important point: If game design can be seen as a form of public policy in worlds that successfully produce fun, when players return to the real world, they will expect public policies influenced by game design. As Castronova puts it, virtual worlds “are on the path to becoming the most powerful source of personal meaning in the contemporary world” (p. 207). They are the new frontier.

*The Second Life Herald* offers a different take on the notion that code (or game design) is law, or that virtual-world designers might be considered models for future real-world policy-makers. Where Castronova might extol the successes of game design as a form of public policy, Ludlow and Wallace confront the issues of virtual worlds “not by delving into legal precedent and software code, but simply by telling the stories of the people on

the edge” (p. 3). Based on their work as the “crusading virtual journalists” Urizenus Sklar and Walker Spaight in *The Sims Online* and *Second Life*, the authors gather together documentation and reportage that portray virtual worlds not as harmonious places but as contentious ones. They have little praise for game design as effective fun policy, but they offer much in the way of solid muckraking. Contrast Castronova’s claim that game design proffers a public policy devoted to human happiness (p. 108) to the verdict of these authors that “the dark forces lurking in the shadows of Urizenus’ story are known collectively as Electronic Arts, Inc.” (p. 12).

Ludlow and Wallace identify the neuralgic point in the conflict between players—or residents in *Second Life*—and game developers. It is the divergence between activist Larry Lessig’s notion of “code as law” and the administration of virtual worlds by commercial companies (pp. 216, 234). They raise the issue, then, of who actually rules the metaverse. Is it players whose transgressive play, hacks, exploits, and unpredictable creativity often bypass the hopelessly overwhelmed administrators of these spaces? Maybe. Yet, at the same time players are faced with “giving up their freedoms” (p. 234) for the privilege of being creative in virtual worlds governed by “monolithic, unimaginative

corporations" (p. 266). *The Second Life Herald* raises these provocative issues by citing important events in the history of two virtual worlds. It is the only one of these books that documents its sources, and its concern for accuracy and attention to historical detail sets *The Second Life Herald* apart in the still young literature of virtual worlds.

While Au's book is not quite in the same league as the other two, at least *Exodus to the Virtual World* and *The Second Life Herald* together with T. L. Taylor's *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (2006) provide the basis for a triangulation of issues concerning governance in worlds built for play. As debate continues about the importance of virtual worlds as an escape from RL (real life) or as an inspiration for efforts to redesign it, we can certainly agree that these books put important issues into play.

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—Henry Lowood, *Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA*

### **Under Pressure: Rescuing Our Children from the Culture of Hyper-Parenting**

*Carl Honoré*

New York: HarperOne, 2008. Resources, notes, index. 291 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780061128806.

### **A Nation of Wimps: The High Cost of Invasive Parenting**

*Hara Estroff Marano*

New York: Broadway Books, 2008.

Notes, index. 307 pp. \$23.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780767924030.

### **Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children**

*Tom Farrey*

New York: ESPN Books, 2008. Appen-

dices, notes, index. 383 pp. \$24.95 cloth.

ISBN: 9781933060460.

Some people believe that if the next generation is not, indeed, going to hell, it is on some kind of downward trajectory created by bad parenting. These days some of those expressing such opinions know how to write, how to organize their arguments, and how to present their facts, all in a way that makes the age-old complaint seem less sentimental and even, somehow, scientific. At least this is so of the authors of three recent books on, respectively, the culture of hyperparenting, invasive parenting, and parenting obsessed with raising star athletes. Let us consider all three books together because all three authors see the way so many parents raise children to satisfy their own egos as a growing worldwide problem.

*Under Pressure*, by Carl Honoré, is a pleasure to read, in part because it is so well written, but mostly because it takes us to so many different loca-