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Producing, negotiating and sharing knowledge about virtual worlds: discursive constructions of Second Life

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Abstract.
The study presented in the paper belongs to a wider, collaborative research project on virtual worlds that brings together university researchers and different partners who work practically with virtual worlds in different organisational contexts. The collaborative research project is practice-oriented both in the sense that the project aims to analyse a plurality of localised practices in virtual worlds and in the sense that a goal is to develop concepts and methods for the design, as well as the analysis, of innovation in virtual worlds. In common with the wider research project, the paper operates with a view of innovation as socially and culturally specific practices of meaning-making taking place in social interaction. In those practices, knowledge is constructed, negotiated and shared. The object of analysis in this paper is the construction, negotiation and sharing of knowledge about the virtual world, Second Life, in the collaborative research project itself. The paper explores what knowledge about Second Life is produced in the interaction between the collaborating actors in research meetings. The paper applies a discourse analytical approach in order to analyse how the different forms of knowledge are constructed in different discourses that each represent specific ways of giving meaning to Second Life and thus delimit the collaborating researchers' scope for action. Three main questions are addressed: In the construction of Second Life as an object of discourse, what meanings are ascribed to Second Life? How are researchers and users constructed as discursive subjects? And how does the discursive construction of "Second Life" and of users and researchers delimit the production of knowledge about virtual worlds in the collaborative research project?

The study presented in the paper belongs to a wider, collaborative research project on virtual worlds that brings together university researchers and different partners who work practically with virtual worlds in different organisational contexts. The collaborative research project is practice-oriented both in the sense that the project aims to analyse a plurality of localised practices in

virtual worlds and in the sense that a goal is to develop concepts and methods for furthering practices of innovation in virtual worlds. In common with the wider research project, the paper conceptualises innovation as socially and culturally specific practices of meaning-making that take place in social interaction. In those practices, knowledge is constructed, negotiated and shared. The object of analysis in this paper is the construction, negotiation and sharing of knowledge about the virtual world, Second Life, within the framework of the collaborative research project. The paper explores the kinds of knowledge about Second Life that the collaborating actors produce in research meetings. The paper applies a discourse analytical approach in order to analyse how the different forms of knowledge are constructed in different discourses that each represent specific ways of giving meaning to Second Life and thus, together, delimit the researchers' scope for action. The particular focus is on how the discourses conceptualise the possibilities and limitations of Second Life with respect to innovation. Carey (2007) identifies as an important research issue with respect to virtual worlds the question of how social conventions for interaction are established, shared and regulated (2007: 84). In the paper, a key concern is how the establishment, sharing and regulation of such social conventions are constructed discursively in discussion of the possibilities and limitations of Second Life.

The paper addresses three main questions: In the construction of Second Life as an object of discourse, what meanings are ascribed to Second Life? How are researchers and users constructed as discursive subjects? And how does the discursive construction of "Second Life" and of users and researchers delimit the production of knowledge about virtual worlds in the collaborative research project? First, I briefly describe the collaborative research project under study in this paper and my own role in the project. Then, I outline the paper's discourse analytical framework and methods of data production. Finally, I sketch out some of the discursive patterns that I have identified in my ongoing – and as yet incomplete - mapping of the discursive constructions of Second Life and users-researchers.

The research collaboration

The duration of the collaborative research project is from 2008-2011 and the project has, at the time of writing, run for eight months. During these eight months, a kick-off meeting, two major workshops, two smaller project meetings, a three-day series of talks with a guest professor and a

one-day seminar with guest speakers have been held. The project is organised as a collaboration between university researchers at two universities (five senior researchers including myself, two post-doctoral researchers and three doctoral students) and a range of different partners who work practically with virtual worlds in different organisational contexts (encompassing both public organisations and private business). In the following, I will refer to the first group as university researchers and the second group as partners (as they are also called in the project itself).

As noted above, the project has a practice-orientation both in the sense that the aim is to analyse a plurality of different virtual world practices and in the sense that a goal is to further the development of those practices through the application of relevant theories, methods and analytical insights. All the participants – both university researchers and partners – are active actors in Second Life practices through their engagement in the project and, in some cases, their interest and engagement in Second Life extend beyond project-related activities.

My specific role as one of the university researchers is to follow and analyse the production, negotiation and sharing of knowledges about Second Life in the collaborative project. In the study presented in this paper, I concentrate on the **content** of the knowledges produced, while in another study presented elsewhere (Phillips, forthcoming) the primary focus is on the **processes by which** we create knowledge through the sharing and negotiation of knowledge forms in practice-oriented, collaborative research about virtual worlds. Although the principal interest of this paper is in **what** knowledges are produced, analytical attention is still paid to **how** knowledge is produced dialogically through processes of negotiation in the interaction between the negotiating actors. The **what** and **how** questions are intimately interlinked as what can be said is constituted through the context of interaction in which it is said. The kinds of knowledge about Second Life created in the collaborative research meetings are obviously shaped by the nature of the project as a collaborative research venture in which the university researchers decline the role of sole or primary authority and sovereign agent of knowledge production and instead invite other actors – practitioners in virtual worlds - into the research process as co-producers of knowledge. The ways in which the different collaborating actors position themselves and each other – for example, as different kinds of experts - shape the kinds of knowledge produced, just as the practice-orientation of the project also fundamentally shapes knowledge production. Knowledge production in the research project takes place through the enactment of a "we" which encompasses a heterogeneous set of actors bringing different identities, knowledge forms and knowledge interests to the interaction. And in these processes, certain voices and the different identities and forms of knowledge they articulate dominate and others are marginalised or silenced.

Analytical framework

The discourse analytical framework applied in this paper for exploring the production and negotiation of knowledge about Second Life as a field of practice is based on a combination of three social constructionist approaches to discourse analysis: the form of critical discourse analysis developed by Norman Fairclough (Fairclough 1992; 1995a; 2003), the form of discursive psychology associated with Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Wetherell and Potter 1992) and Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The distinctive contribution of discourse analytic approaches lies in the focus - across approaches - on how discourses work to constitute knowledge, identities and power relations in particular ways that mask, marginalise or totally exclude other ways of knowing and doing.

All three approaches are based on the assumption that language use is central to the formation of our social world: our ways of talking are organized in discourses that create representations of reality that are not mere reflections of a pre-existing reality - the representations are constitutive of reality (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002). This represents an understanding of discourse that is based on Foucault's definition of a discourse as a limited set of possible utterances which set the limits for what can we can say and, therefore, do (Foucault 1972). Discourses make possible particular forms of action and exclude alternative forms of acting and hence alternative forms of social organisation in relation to virtual worlds. We ascribe meanings to what we do as a constitutive part of what we do. Thus discourses have consequences for action.

This perspective underpins this paper's analytical interest in the specific ways in which people talk about, and thus give meaning, to virtual worlds as fields of social practice, which encompass certain possibilities and limitations for user-driven processes of innovation in virtual worlds. The participants in the project share and negotiate knowledge through discourses, which ascribe particular meanings to Second Life worlds and particular actor-identities to participants in Second Life. As the discourses ascribe Second Life with meanings that constitute it as a meaningful object, they define how we can think and act in relation to Second Life as an arena for user-driven

innovation and thus they delimit the existing and future production of knowledge in the collaborative research project.

Discourse is closely tied to power. Power operates through discourse by creating our social world and identities in particular ways. As power creates our world, it is productive but as it creates it in ways that exclude alternative forms of social organisation, it is also constraining. Since discourses enable us to talk about the world – including virtual worlds such as "Second Life" - individual discourses can be understood as resources. But because they set the boundaries for what we can say and do with respect to 'Second Life', they exclude alternatives.

I apply all three approaches on the grounds that they supplement each other as analytical tools. I use critical discourse analysis in order to map the discourses - including their construction on the basis of a range of linguistic features - and their relations to one another and to make a connection between the discourses and broader societal development, namely the constitution of a new space for social life.

Discursive psychology is applied in order to gain insight into how, in the production and negotiation of meaning, people's rhetorical positioning of themselves and others within particular discourses creates particular discursive patterns. Thus discursive psychology is used to support the critical discourse analysis of the relations between different discourses within the order of discourse. I also draw on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory in order to analyse how discourses are formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain nodal points (which are privileged signs around which the other signs are ordered), whether the different discourses engage in a hegemonic struggle over meaning and how identities are constructed on the basis of subject positions within discourses.

The methods of data production used in the study presented in this paper are participant-observation and sound-recordings of the meetings that have been held in the collaborative research project. The observation-based data are the product of detailed field notes. The observation data and sound recordings are combined with informal conversations with participants, powerpoint presentations which the participants have given at the workshops and meetings and email

correspondence. The observational lens is shaped by a theoretical interest in which kinds of knowledge about virtual worlds are constructed and negotiated in interaction among the different participants and in how they are constructed and negotiated in interaction. And my approach to observation is based on an ethnomethodological approach to ethnography, focusing on how virtual worlds are constituted discursively through the actions of the participants (Silverman 2001).

Preliminary analysis

In the following, I present some of the discursive patterns that I have identified in a preliminary mapping of the discourses articulated in the research meetings. The different discourses construct different representations of the research object "Second Life" and different subjects (the participants in Second Life and the collaborating researchers who are participating in the research meetings). Below, I show how "Second Life" and particular actor-identities are constructed through the co-articulation of different discourses.

One dominant discourse articulated across all the meetings constructs Second Life as an *object of analytical reflections* based on different forms of knowledge, in particular an experience-based expertise which stresses the actors' active engagement in the field of practice. The discourse offers the subject-position of *experience-based expert*. Often the discourse is articulated together with other discourses which construct Second Life as a particular object, such as a *discourse of social rules under construction* which offers two subject positions – *law-abiding social actor* and *law-breaker* who violates the social conventions of Second Life and thus threatens the emergent social order. These co-articulations create the hybrid identities of *experience-based expert* and *active participant in, and advocate for, Second Life*. In the co-articulations, the researchers as subjects are not experts producing neutral analyses but positioned experts who are actively engaged in Second Life as actors and who are committed, to varying degrees, to furthering Second Life as a field of practice. And they are used to navigating in fields where Second Life is subjected to criticism. In particular, actors respond strongly and frequently to the widespread media representation of Second Life as a failure or flop (the so-called "anti-hype") which followed an initial period of positive publicity for Second Life (the so-called "hype"). This active stance-taking on virtual worlds is the case both for the partners in the collaborative project and for the university researchers. Generally, then, Second Life is not constructed as a neutral study object but as an object whose development the project wants to further. This kind of situated, partisan discourse

whereby the researchers position themselves as engaged user-analysts of Second Life rather than just as analysts is common for research in virtual worlds. For example, Nesson and Nesson (2008) construct their article as an argument, based on empirical, practice-based research, in favour of the "current value and future potential" of virtual worlds in education (2008: 273). In the article, they directly address the reservations of critics and sceptics.

The discourse of social rules under construction takes its starting point in a view of Second Life as a new field of social practice in which social conventions and rules of conduct are in the process of being established. Within the terms of the discourse, the necessity of establishing and regulating rules of conduct is taken for granted. And it is also implied that violations of the rules are a threat to the social order of Second Life. This discourse works to constitute Second Life as a space for social interaction in which social conventions are established, shared and regulated (Carey 2007). The following example is taken from the kick-off meeting on 25 February, where the meeting participants have been divided into two groups to discuss, on the basis of their experience with Second Life (if they have any), what they see as the problems with Second Life, what ideas they may have for solving those problems and opening up for the use of Second Life in processes of innovation, and what new knowledge they see that we will have a need for. In the example, the first speaker is a highly experienced professional user of Second Life who is participating in the collaborative project in this capacity. He positions himself as a central agent in the regulation of social behaviour in Second Life:

Anders: And then there are all those idiots who move into Second Life, right? From people who cause trouble in our sandpits or run around and shoot at people and cause trouble, people who can't behave themselves properly. But there are also firms. The mind boggles […]
Marie: Does it require more social skills?
Anders: I don't think that it requires more than in real life or that it makes particular demands. Well there are also many who say that Second Life is their Second Life. It may be that it is for some people. It isn't for me. I am the same person, whether or not I am in the one platform or the other platform. I try to be the same person. Whereas many people don't play with open cards […] The problem with Second Life is that you can be anonymous. There are some people who enjoy that, right? You can do whatever you like. Because in principle you can't trace back to who it is who has caused trouble […]
Sisse: In the book that I am writing at the moment, I have a case-history […]. And there are some stories about how you can be cheated and conned and really be subjected to terrible things. So that's completely right. I can remember, wasn't it at the University of Southern Denmark? A long time ago. Where there was somebody who threw a virtual bomb. Yes. But the situation was also totally incredible. It was all set up for a big meeting with a discussion about what universities were doing in Second Life and that kind of thing, right? And then someone comes and throws a virtual bomb and started a countdown. And it broke in and destroyed everything. All we could do was sit there and follow the countdown and then it exploded, right? And he did it several times!

Anders: Nothing else happened, but it was annoying.
Sisse: Yes, an example of chicane. (kick-off meeting, lines 579-616)

The participants in the field of practice are ascribed identities either as social actors who abide by the rules and behave appropriately or as social actors who break the rules and behave inappropriately. All the speakers in the extract speak within the terms of the discourse. The participants in Second Life are constructed as people who have control over their avatars. Thus Second Life and life outside are constructed as two parallel worlds in which the same people participate: "Well there are also many who say that Second Life is their Second Life. It may be that it is for some people. It isn't for me. I am the same person, whether or not I am in the one platform or the other platform. I try to be the same person". Second Life is thus constructed not as a separate world but as a world in which you take your "real life" identity in with you. The problem, according to the discourse, is that there are some participants in Second Life who do not adhere to the rules and this problem has its roots in the possibilities that Second Life gives the individual of (re) presenting the self in different ways: "Whereas many people don't play with open cards […] The problem with Second Life is that you can be anonymous". This problematisation of identity construction in Second Life contrasts with a discourse outlined below on the advantages of Second Life as a platform for the flexible construction of multiple identities, often celebrated in postmodernist texts on the new media. Accepting the terms of the discourse, all of the participants refrain from questioning the concern over the violation of the rules or the application of sanctions against those who are guilty of a violation. It is implied that the rules for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour that are under construction in Second Life are the same as in the world outside, and the legitimacy of these rules is unquestioned:

Anders: Well, I've kicked 130 avatars out of my area. And many of them are returnees. I kick them out and then they make a new avatar. And then they are in again.
Sisse: How can you see that they are returnees?
Anders: Yes, well, one of them, he's always called Mr. Benson as his first name. But with 8 different surnames, right? The big idiot!
Heidi: Can't you just "mute" Mr. Benson? [people laugh]
Anders: There's nothing written down. It can't be done.
Philip: They sent someone out onto a barren field, a cornfield, once a long time ago. It was someone who had done a lot of cheating. So there's this famous, the avatar can come out onto an island that's totally isolated and can sit there for 1-2 days and get bored. That was some years back, and there was one who ended up out there. And then he served his sentence. Because he had cheated at something or other. And then he could get permission to come in again [..]
Anders: They've still got that. I don't know if they do physically. There are many who get quarantine for a while. Well, I also report people, I haven't done so much recently, because I don't think it has any effect but in any case you can still report inappropriate behaviour. But you don't get any answer back, other than that they've received and treated the report. You don't get to

know what they do about it or if they do anything about it. So you can't be bothered doing it. It's easier just to kick them out.
Philip: It's interesting to follow the development of the net in relation to credibility and where they have that reputation system, like on E-Bay. And it's also a question of how to transfer it to Second Life because there's a lack of something like that, so you can avoid these kinds of episodes. (kick-off, lines 617-648).

Philip suggests that the problem with the lack of control of aberrant behaviour in Second Life can be solved through borrowing a convention from another medium, E-Bay. This is in line with Carey's point that people using new media may often borrow conventions from a previous or related medium in order to regulate behaviour (Carey, 2007: 84).

Sisse continues with a positive articulation of discourse, making the point that rules *are* being established through self-regulation among the existing Second Life communities:

Sisse: I think now that it seems like it's under construction. I have a clear understanding in any case that it's in any case very difficult to do anything in Wonderful Denmark which doesn't go round in circles in the Danish groups, right? It's almost like in a village, it's so quick to circulate. Gossip and other things. And also if there any events. They circulate also quite fast. I think it depends a lot on where you are. That is also I think one of the problems that one talks about Second Life as if it is one thing. And a lot has to be done in order to make that differentiation. There is crap in Second Life, real crap, and then there are some things that are sublimely good. And masses of things in between. And that differentiation, that's going to be necessary soon. You showed me the mainland at one point, and that demonstrated it clearly. How completely awful it is. And if you go in as a newcomer and see it, there's nothing to say, if you think "Second Life what on earth is there for me here?" (kick-off, lines 649-663).

Here, the discourse of social rules is articulated together with a discourse that constructs Second Life as a plurality of different practices. The discourses are harnessed in argumentation in support of Second Life, the development of Second Life being dependent on its becoming more popular. In order not to lose disenchanted newcomers, "differentiation, that's going to be necessary soon". Thus Sisse positions herself as both an engaged, partisan analyst and active participant working to develop Second Life and Second Life is constructed both as an analytical object and as an object to be promoted.

One important discourse which was used to construct Second Life both in terms of possibilities and in terms of limitations was a ***discourse of usefulness.*** In the following example, it is articulated in argumentation for the possibilities that Second Life offers:

Birthe: But some of what I think I also is that you can start to pick up clothes and dance too. That's some of what can attract you as a new beginner, right? Because wow, here you get something you can use for something, right? (Workshop 1, lines 125-129).

The discourse of usefulness was also drawn on in argumentation about the limitations of Second Life with respect to what it can be used for. Here, the absence of obvious usefulness was often linked to the openness of the space with respect to function and this was presented as an obstacle to its becoming more popular. The user-driven character is defined in negative terms as a source of difficulty for the user:

Hannah: But the next issue. Is what's the point of my being in there? Why should I be in there? It ought to offer something extra, something that you just can't get in real life. That's hard to tackle, right? And there's a lot of talk about user-created content today on the net. You can say that Second Life, is one of the places where everything is user-created. And that's also a huge challenge. Let's say that you can find out how to control your avatar very quickly, to undress it and dress it. And then what? The next step is to create something inside. And we you create something inside, you start to reproduce something you know. That's hardly likely to be unique. In our project, it started there where we had a bit of firm ground under our feet, right? The next step should be to create something in terms of the premises of the universe and something unique. And I think that's a challenge to get that far.
(kick-off, lines 747-762)

Another feature which as constructed as a limitation was the steep learning curve required of newcomers to Second Life. In the following example, the steep learning curve is incorporated into the discourse of social rules. Here, it is argued that newcomers should be able to come in as guest without rights:

Anders: And there's another challenge with the learning curve. It's steep. All that you've got to go through and answer and take a stance towards and the only thing you want to do is see what it's about. You have to dress your avatar and learn to talk and everything. And it's just not necessary. There ought to be some finished avatars that are ready to jump into, guest avatars. . Which don't have any rights, but which can be used to browse with. (kick-off, lines 667-674)

There is also a problem with the steep learning curve in relation to university studies (where Second Life is a study object and medium of communication):

Sisse: Well, you can say that that learning curve is steep. And experience from the workshop which has just finished confirms that it's steep even for young people, you've got to remember that, right? They're in the middle of their twenties, these young people. And their university students so they're not complete idiots. They are actually quick bright. Some of them, Simon, you must admit [laughs] And still they sit there and have these problems. We are so group-oriented, so the students pull each other up by the hair. But there are still some who cannot be pulled up by the hair, it's that hard. (kick-off, lines 737-746)

Another key discourse articulated across meetings is a discourse of high hopes in which the existing limitations with respect to Second Life are acknowledged and weight is placed on the potential of Second Life in the future:

Anders: It is going slowly in the right direction. But when you are out early, you've just got to wait for the market to mature sooner or later, right? Whether it'll take a month or a year, it's not to know. But in any case we can use the time to get a good head-start.
Kasper: Yes.
Anders: In relation to the competitors that maybe will emerge at some point.
Kasper: Precisely.
Anders: Because today, we still don't have any competitors. There are no others, who are doing what we're doing in Second Life. Well, seen with Danish eyes. (workshop 1, discussion about Sisses matrix for designing in Second Life, lines 145-153)

The low level of participation in Second Life is conceived in positive terms - the absence of competitors allows Anders to get a head-start. In many other cases, however, the low level of participation is problematised and the negative hype that Second Life has received in the media is blamed, as in the following example:

Louise: Have you experienced the negative hype as something that has had an effect?
Anders: Yes, because after the summer holidays about three months passed, I think, where not a single new customer came. And we could also see on the traffic-figure, that it went the wrong way and the press coverage was also negative. But then at Christmas time, in December, it started to show signs of life again. And then we crawled up the ladder again, slowly right? But we are far from the level we were at in Spring last year, it was completely wild then, right? I was able just to sit and welcome the customers – well, almost. The first 5-6 customers came by themselves, I could hardly keep up.

The personal investment that Anders has in the success of Second Life and the problems he faces from the impact of the negative hype is manifest in the above citations. The negative hype is treated as a direct threat to activity in Second Life. In the project, the negative hype was viewed as a threat which the project had to act directly to curb. This implies that the project as a whole had invested in Second Life in such a way that Second Life's well-being was in the interests of the project. Thus participants at one workshop, following discussion of the pronouncement in the media of the "death" of Second Life, were invited to suggest constructive ideas for how to exert influence on journalists to produce more balanced representations.

Concluding comments

In this paper, I have explored some of the knowledge about "Second Life" produced in the course of a research project, through a partial mapping of the discourses articulated, that each ascribe particular meanings to Second Life and particular identities to the users and researchers (who often position themselves as users). The motivating assumption is that the discursive construction of "Second Life" and of users and researchers *delimits* the production of knowledge about virtual worlds in the collaborative research project: taken as a totality, the range of discourses articulated in research practices represent an overall framework for meaning-making, making possible and constraining the ways of giving meaning to and hence acting in relation to Second Life as a research object and as a new field of social practice.

One can then ask the questions: in what particular ways do the discourses delimit the production of knowledge? What discourses that produce alternative knowledge and identities are marginalised or excluded? To begin to ask these questions, the mapping of the discourses needs to be completed. Then, the different constructions of "Second Life" identified can be related to other ways of giving meaning to Second Life produced in other research projects. The focus here could be on what special characteristics are ascribed to Second Life as a distinctive space for social interaction and what are defined as the possibilities and limitations of that space with respect to user-driven innovation. Other fields for comparison could be the discursive construction of "Second Life" in media reporting and in practices in Second Life itself in which knowledges about Second Life are also produced and communicated.

The answers to the questions could be used to further ongoing research, both within the project and in other studies. Above, I have, for example, pointed out that the situated, partisan discourse identified above whereby the researchers position themselves as engaged user-analysts and advocates of Second Life is prevalent in current research on virtual worlds. The example given was the article by Nesson and Nesson (2008), in which they formulate their article as an argument in favour of virtual worlds, providing support to their argument in the form of detailed empirical analysis of the use of Second Life in a particular educational initiative. Another example is Gordon and Koo (2008) who argue that "the immersive, playful and social qualities" of Second Life are "uniquely appropriate to engage people in dialogue about their communities". My point here is not that this research thrust is necessarily problematic but that it is important, I think, to

take a reflexive position and consider the implications for research knowledge production and for knowledge production processes in Second Life, with a view to opening up for other ways of understanding and acting – as researchers and users - in relation to Second Life.

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