

Alina Nazmeeva

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Decentraland, 2021, still. Courtesy Ari Meilich and Esteban Ordano.

The Politics of the Virtual

You are standing in a beautiful forest. The birds' chirping is blending with ambient pastoral music. You are so excited to hike through this adorable space, but remember you also need to harvest your crops. As a new resident in town, you are thrilled to meet your neighbours. Your body is oscillating repetitively with eager anticipation of your next adventure. If you lost your job during the Covid-19 pandemic, you might sell bells on the black market to pay your bills. Want to visit museums? Welcome to Getty and the Met. Want a cause to fight for? Join active political protests. Shop fashion, attend professional conferences, relax in luxury resorts. Welcome to *Animal Crossing*, a virtual world that can get you through the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

We tend to rely on familiar definitions to name new things. Cars used to be called "horseless carriages", and what is referred to as a phone today is in fact an extremely powerful portable computer. "Games" are no "games" either. Calling virtual worlds "games" runs the risk of obfuscating their political, social and cultural potential. Virtual worlds, or multi-user virtual environments, are the places

where games are played but other activities can unfold as well. Unlike virtual worlds of the common imagination, distinguished from the “real” world in a clear-cut dichotomy, “real virtual worlds” (pun intended) are rather deeply rooted into everyday life and penetrate nearly every aspect of reality.

Virtual worlds are profoundly ingrained in reality, and reality in many ways is constructed by virtual worlds. In *Gamer Theory*, McKenzie Wark provocatively stated that it is not the games that become more reality-like, but quite the opposite, that reality is turning into a game.¹ Reality, by virtue of digital logic projected all over the place, becomes a mere series of imperfect games. War, work, relationships, life turn into a game, and the world turns into a succession of overlapping gamespaces. Alfie Bown, in *The Playstation Dreamworld*, suggests that games are no distraction – instead, they are a kind of ally of the capital in the workplace: five minutes of playing *Candy Crush* cause guilt trips that enable extra-efficient work for the rest of the day.² Liam Mitchell suggests that videogames provide indirect means of understanding other digital systems – from the ubiquitous surveillance to high-frequency trading.³

Recognised as social spaces, virtual worlds are becoming grounds and means of political action and publicity. In 2020, the then-US presidential candidate Joe Biden rolled out an official campaign in *Animal Crossing*. There have been Black Lives Matter protests in *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims* and *Animal Crossing*. Before the pandemic, in 2007, the French far-right group National Rally established their headquarters in *Second Life* and was promptly mobbed out by other residents. In 2017, players protested against Pride events in *Runescape*. *Minecraft* has become home to the free press, a collaborative design and citizen science tool, and is used to foster empathy.

The relationship between the Hong Kong protests of 2019–2020 and virtual worlds and videogames reveal the slippages between physical and virtual spaces as arenas of political participation, representation and expression. The protests, their environment and

atmosphere of conflict on the streets inadvertently recall the ambiance (A E S T H E T I C S) of a videogame. In response, videogames are created to support either the protest movement or its opponents. Furthermore, Hong Kong protesters engaged in violent battles with mainland players in *Grand Theft Auto V* on Chinese servers, reskinning their avatars with protester gear, while mainlanders used customised riot police avatars.

Beyond constituting new sites open for political struggle, virtual worlds produce their own tensions. The ambiguity of virtual worlds and the deep yet often invisible entrenchment with the physical world, globalisation and technopolitics transforms them into sites for new forms of governance, exploitation, social and political collisions. Since the early 2000s, they have become growing job markets and sites of digital (re)production. Gold-farming workshops – offices where workers collect and trade valuable in-game items while playing online digital games – spread rapidly in countries where labour and electricity are cheap. In Venezuela, *Runescape* helps people to sustain their lives and earn money. In *Second Life*, some residents make a living designing virtual goods, running event spaces or developing land and speculating in the virtual real-estate market. NFT-based virtual worlds are hotbeds of virtual real-estate speculation.

In theory, the expanding landscape of virtual worlds builds on the legacy of the early internet utopian sentiment for immaterial space beyond the governing bodies of nation-states. In practice, they have not reconciled the exploitative practices and contradictions with their early liberatory and even socialist undertones. The ambiguous relationship between the “real” and the “virtual” as well as between play and work under global capitalism exemplified in virtual worlds convoluted the questions of ownership and authorship, often for the benefit of videogame corporations. Free digital labour of the players drives the value of virtual worlds and constitutes their market. In some cases, the virtual world spaces are produced by the players themselves. For instance, *Second Life* and every single object in it is almost entirely built by its residents. While *Second Life* residents can convert in-world currency to hard cash, in most virtual worlds one risks permanent ban for the

conversion of in-game “funny money” back into hard currency. Furthermore, when users purchase virtual goods or virtual real estate (for hard cash), in most cases they merely gain a right-to-use licence within the virtual world. As the medium bestows upon the player the agency to modify and affect the world and its objects, this dubious agency divorces the virtual objects and their value from the player’s labour.

Who has the right to a virtual corporate-owned city? Virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, *Ultima Online* and *Second Life* have a history of in-world player-led protests aimed at confronting new policies, updates and changes implemented by the corporations without the players’ consent. These protests are often countered with a series of account suspensions and bans. *Second Life* had to settle a series of lawsuits from the players seeking compensation for their virtual property loss. These examples of political confrontation, social assembly and legal pushback reveal the potential of virtual worlds as spaces for critical political discourse rather than simply entertainment products akin to malls or amusement parks.

The spatial politics of virtual worlds are rooted in the concept of private property, linked to the algorithmic protocols that govern the virtual land. This land, imagined to be an infinite terrain of bits, is in fact by design a finite, calculated space that is purposefully organised. Virtual worlds are enclosed pockets of the web where the digital logic of replicability and access does not apply. For virtual worlds to function, artificial scarcity is rendered necessary. The land is finite, and the number of virtual goods is fixed. The systems of protocols and rules produce spatial and action frameworks that limit the scope of interaction afforded to the users. Mirroring the practices of physical urban planning and land management, there are rules and regulations in design, land policy and zoning, neighbourhood covenants and voting mechanisms.

Decentraland, launched in 2019, alongside other NFT-based virtual worlds, manifests the ethos of the crypto community in 3D. Described as a virtual world owned by its users, where they build, manage and monetise all content, *Decentraland* is governed by a

decentralised autonomous organisation (DAO).⁴ Based on the notion that people are able to organise themselves and manage resources without any hierarchical decision-making structures, conceptually the DAO is an organisation run by rules created by the members in advance and encoded into smart contracts. In *Decentraland*, everyone who has a stake – owns a LAND token or MANA (Decentraland’s currency) – can vote.

Yet, these spaces and the rules that govern them can be subverted and negotiated. Media theorist Alex Galloway proposed “counter-gaming”⁵ as a subversive practice of play to disrupt or challenge the oppressive limits of a videogame, to intervene in the virtual worlds and interact within them beyond the pre-defined rules, narratives, aesthetic or political choices. Countergaming is a subject widely explored in artistic practices, as well as in collective practices of “modding”. Player-led videogame modifications, or “mods”, when players alter or add some game aspects and release them as installable game patches, exemplify these dynamics. While mods are often criticised as digital labour that allows corporations to extract value from player-driven and participatory activities, they can arguably be construed as a subversive practice. Created out of resistance to the pre-packaged game narratives and desire to challenge them, mods and modding communities have become the counter-discursive platforms that expand the realm of possibility for political action.

With 2.5 billion gamers worldwide, virtual worlds have become an aspect of everyday reality. While the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed their reach even further, virtual worlds had established themselves as a dominant cultural form long before 2020. As virtual goods, objects and real estate start penetrating a broad range of industries, providing a tangible cultural and commercial value, and virtual worlds become sites for social and political action, the dichotomy between virtual and actual or “real” is no longer culturally or politically productive. While the rules/laws/protocols or DAOs to govern the next generations of virtual worlds are still open for negotiation, it is clear that they will inevitably spill outside of their corporate-controlled borders towards new social forms and

practices.

1 – McKenzie Wark, “Agony,” in *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

2 – Alfie Bown, “Level 1: From Farming Simulation to Dystopic Wasteland,” in *The PlayStation Dreamworld* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

3 – Liam Mitchell, “Introduction: Gaming Time,” in *Ludopolitics: Videogames against Control* (Zero Books, 2018).

4 – The DAO has been used in a broad range of applications beyond virtual worlds. For reference, see: Shermin Voshmgir, “What Is DAO – Decentralized Autonomous Organizations,” BlockchainHub, 2020,

<https://blockchainhub.net/dao-decentralized-autonomous-organization>.

5 – Alexander R. Galloway, “Countergaming,” in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 107–26.

Alina Nazmееva is a researcher, architect and artist investigating the relationships between cities and digital games, interfaces and publics, CGI and politics. Alina holds a Master of Science in Urbanism from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She was a fellow of the New Normal programme at the Strelka Institute of Media, Architecture and Design (2017). Currently she is a research associate at the future urban collectives lab at MIT where she works on designing spaces and platforms or new forms of collectivity, and a research analyst at the MIT Real Estate Innovation Lab where she focuses her research on understanding the economy and design of virtual worlds and online games. Her writing has been published in PLAT, Media-N and CARTHA Magazine.