



Mapping virtual communities by their visual productions: The example of the Second Life Steampunk community



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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, the identities and structures of virtual communities develop outside the traditional definitions of geography and physical constraints. Among the best models to study the identification process in virtual communities are the communities of fans of imaginary universes. Steampunk—neo-Victorian fiction with a science fiction twist—has for instance given rise to a large community, which is very active both in real life and in virtual spaces, for instance in the online 3D immersive platform Second Life. By collecting and analysing hundreds of visual artifacts generated by members of the steampunk community of Second Life, we found a repertoire of visual and lexical characteristics with which to identify the community. In addition, examining the characteristics displayed by visual productions from other communities allowed us to map relationships between different communities based on their aesthetics. This data suggests that the quantification of visual clues points out to interlocking relationships between different community aesthetics, forming a network where differences are visible, but fluidity still dominates. Furthermore, our results could serve as a model to study how communities in different media (immersive universes, games, social media based on visual materials such as Pinterest or Instagram) generate their own visual identity.

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1. Introduction

With the rise of virtual spaces, the nature of human communities has dramatically evolved. In the digital age, the identities and structures of virtual communities develop outside the traditional definitions of geography and physical constraints (Kozinets, 1999; Taylor, 2002; Blanchard, 2008; Jung & Kang, 2010; Guitton, 2012b). This phenomenon is particularly salient in immersive online virtual worlds, which offer new territories that can often be customised by users, and where rules and canons get more labile (Taylor, 2002; Boellstorff, 2008; Bruns, 2008; Shelton, 2010; Guitton, 2012a,b).

In order to endure, virtual communities need to constitute an internal cohesion. However, in contrast to real-world communities, they have to do that even while having no physical space and often no predefined social identities to rely on. Their construction, structuring, and maintenance thus require markers of identity, which can be adopted by the community as a whole and by individual

members, and make it possible to identify and tell apart different communities (Blanchard, 2008; Lortie & Guitton, 2011; Nagy & Koles, 2014). The identification of those markers is thus a crucial part of the specific processes of interaction in virtual communities. In general, it represents a fundamental first step when community members interact, as it is the main way to ascertain which community the person they are interacting with belongs to. Such insights can be evidenced for the construction of a visual identity in the particular case of immersive virtual settings; but given the common properties of virtual communities, they could easily be extended to any virtual community heavily relying on virtual artifacts, including online platforms such as Pinterest or Instagram. However, identifying such markers in an objective way is far from being an easy task, and represents one of the trickiest challenges of the study of virtual spaces.

Norms that define belonging and self-identification in online communities often take the form of some type of common aesthetics, which can be identified through multimodal characteristics, mainly visual and lexical. Interestingly, online spaces allow users to generate and store considerable amounts of visual material. These corpuses of virtual artifacts can be studied as a proxy to examine the aesthetics of a community, and therefore its visual identification mechanisms. Since all artifacts are generated by

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the community itself, they can be taken to paint an accurate picture of how community members signal their own identity. Rather than describing the essence of a virtual community, such clues describe how identity and belonging are marked, and thus give important insights into the processes of identification and self-identification that are fundamental to online interactions.

However, finding appropriate models to study this phenomenon is a problematic issue. Indeed, virtual spaces blend elements of real-life acquaintances and virtual networks, and of individual and collective identities (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Fogel & Nehmad, 2009; Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). The communities constructed around fictional universes could provide a suitable answer to the challenge of studying the specificities of virtual communities. Inasmuch as such communities are entirely based on a constructed fictional space rather than a real offline space, they represent ideal models to examine how being based on a virtual space and virtual identities changes the way a community is structured (Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002; Guitton, 2012b).

Among these fiction-based communities, the steampunk community represents a model of choice. Steampunk is a genre usually construed as a re-enactment of a fantastical Victorian era, characterised by its particular ethos (a reject of streamlined, functional aesthetics in technology, an emphasis on DIY and handmade crafts, anarchist or counter-hegemonic politics), which has since the 1990's served as the basis for the construction of a vast community, offline and online (Onion, 2008; Forlini, 2010; Perschon, 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Bix, 2013; Cristofari & Guitton, 2014). Unlike some other communities constructed around fictional universes, the steampunk community does not revolve around a central fictional work; there are many steampunk works in the media, but none of them functions as a constitutive or defining element of the community. Instead, it is constructed and structured by its own members. Thus, it is not constrained by a definite frame or canon, and relies on a collaborative process of creation, making it an ideal model to study the collaborative construction of identity by a virtual community. The online steampunk community is particularly vivid in the immersive virtual platform of Second Life. Second Life is an extremely popular immersive environment hosting a number of communities (Boellstorff, 2008; Bruns, 2008; Guitton, 2011, 2012b). One particularity of Second Life is that both the avatars and the space they inhabit are customisable with a considerable degree of freedom; this implies that users have great latitude in constructing their own visual identities (Boellstorff, 2008; Bruns, 2008; Lomanowska & Guitton, 2014).

The Second Life online steampunk community was therefore chosen as a model to study how visual and lexical clues are used to construct the identity of a given virtual community, and the varying degrees of proximity that exist between different communities, through the analysis of the visual presentation of community-generated artifacts, the lexicon used in artifact descriptions, as well as the virtual landscape of a related virtual city. Comparisons with five other virtual communities made it possible to map their relationships on a multi-dimensional continuum. While focusing on both close-up descriptions and big-picture accounts in order to describe the steampunk community of Second Life, the approach we present and validate here could represent an important step towards a better understanding of virtual communities in general.

2. Methods

2.1. Initial corpus selection

Visual characteristics of the steampunk community and five different control communities (the Victorian, vampire, medieval,

Gorean and Star Wars communities) were analysed from a sample of items collected on the Second Life Marketplace using the Second Life Marketplace search engine (Fig. 1). An initial corpus of 400 items was collected for the steampunk community, with additional corpuses of 200 items for each of the five other communities investigated. For each of communities, the totality of the 400 or 200 items of the corpus were selected the same day (4th September 2013 for the steampunk community, 5th September for the Victorian community, 6th September for the vampire community, 7th September for the medieval community, 8th September for the Gorean community, and 9th September for the Star Wars community). Items were collected as they appeared when using the “Most relevant” function of the search engine under an appropriate keyword, with maturity ratings restricted to “General” and “Moderate” ratings. “Adult” ratings were excluded as they mostly consisted of adult-themed animations that did not differ across communities. The keywords used were “steampunk” for the steampunk community, “Victorian” for the Victorian community, “vampire” for the vampire community, “medieval” for the medieval community, “Gor” for the Gorean community, and “Star Wars” for the Star Wars community. The descriptive text around the object (the written text around the item: title, description and in some cases text appearing on the picture itself, to the exclusion of the text that explicitly described the seller or their other activities) had to contain the name of the community in order for the object to be accepted. However, in some cases, words closely derived from that name were also accepted (this concerned the words “vampiric”, and “vampiria” for the vampire community, “gorean” for the Gorean community, and “sw”, “swg”, “swrp” for the Star Wars community).

Items whose main function was decorative were excluded because due to the diversity of aspect they can display in the real world, defining which characteristics could be considered archetypal was judged too subjective (see below). Therefore, items of the following categories were automatically excluded from the study: clothes, jewels, apparel such as hats, belts or cloaks, unless they had a definite function (such as an engineer's belt with tools attached), textures and artwork (unless they included a functional component, such as a frame), whole avatars or avatar components, and animations. On the other hands, other objects could have their characteristics split in two groups: characteristics that are normally expected on the most archetypal representations of the item, and characteristics that are not usually expected, on which this study was focused.

2.2. Definition of characteristics

Items in a virtual world may incorporate many unrealistic or downright fantastical elements; however, they still need to be identifiable. While they do not always resemble their real-world counterpart, they always share some traits with an archetype, that is to say, the most basic version of the relevant item. Characteristics that would be considered normal in real-life (e.g., a trigger on a gun), or would usually be expected on such an object, in the relevant context (e.g., a wooden table in a Victorian or contemporary context; metallic shelves in a modern context) were considered as “archetypal characteristics”. On the other hand, characteristics that deviated from the most basic expectancy, either because they could have been the result of a choice between several equally normal possibilities (e.g., the color of a piece of furniture, a piece of ornamental wood), could have been suppressed (e.g., sculpted legs on a table), or should have (e.g., a steam exhaust on a lamp) were coded as “non-archetypal characteristics”. While archetypal characteristics were considered to identify the nature of the object (e.g. a house, a table, a clock, etc.), non-archetypal characteristics were hypothesised to have an aesthetic purpose,

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