

ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF VIRTUAL WORLD SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

Virtual worlds are online three-dimensional worlds that are often constructed to look much like the real world. As more people begin to use these virtual worlds, virtual communities are emerging enabling various social activities and social interactions to be conducted online. Based on a literature review of social movements, virtual communities and virtual worlds, this paper suggests a framework to guide IS research into this new and exciting area.

Keywords: Social Movements, Virtual Communities, Virtual Worlds

1 INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds enable millions of people to interact with one another through avatars in online three-dimensional worlds. These worlds are often constructed to look much like the real world and can contain mountains, trees, oceans, and wild creatures (Castronova 2007). As an increasing number of people start to use virtual environments, they need to be studied as an important phenomena in their own right (Castronova 2005a, 2005c).

Information Systems (IS) researchers have long been investigating the relationships between technology and organizing. Applegate (1994) reviewed the changes in organizations caused by changing conditions and the role IT played within these organizational transformations. Recently virtual worlds have further changed the way organizations and social groups organize. Schultze and Rennecker (2007), argue that virtual world games have changed the way organizations communicate and conduct business, and are a legitimate arena for conducting IS research. Schultze and Orlikowski (2010) argue for the value in virtual worlds enabling globally distributed work, project management, online learning, and real-time simulations. Virtual world games also offer new and promising opportunities for IS research into virtual organisations and teams (Assmann et al. 2010; Schultze & Orlikowski 2010; Schultze & Rennecker 2007). Virtual worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft have implications for business, education, social sciences, and society as a whole (Messinger et al. 2009). However, there is much that is yet to be understood on how virtual worlds impact organisations and society.

One important social phenomena which has moved into the virtual world is the social movement. Historically, humans have employed many tactics to complain about things they have disliked, or to raise awareness for their cause (Goodwin & Jasper 2003). In modern history, people have banded together to form social movements with the aim of pursuing common goals and achieving social or political change. Social movements are an important means of bringing out social, cultural and political changes through collective action (Staggenborg 2011). In the virtual world, there have been virtual protests in Second Life (Blodgett & Tapia 2010; Robinson 2008), in World of Warcraft (Abaleno 2005; McKenna et al. 2011), and various other virtual worlds (Blodgett 2009; Blodgett & Tapia 2011; Castronova 2003). However, there has been surprisingly little research in this area. Previous research has claimed that social phenomena in the virtual world can be used as a proxy to studying social phenomena in the real world. However, virtual worlds have some important characteristics which make them quite different to the real world. Therefore, further understanding of how virtual world technologies, avatars, and the unique nature of virtual worlds impacts social phenomena is in need of attention from the IS community. To address these issues, this paper presents a research framework designed to provide a roadmap for the IS community in conducting research into this new and exciting area of virtual world social movements.

2 VIRTUAL WORLDS

A virtual world can be defined as “*a synchronous, persistent network of people, represented by avatars, facilitated by networked computers*” (Bell 2008 p. 2). Virtual worlds include social virtual worlds such as Second Life (SL), and gaming virtual worlds, often referred to as Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG), such as World of Warcraft (WoW). In a similar way to Putzke et al. (2010), in this paper we do not distinguish between the different kinds of MMOGs, such as Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG), sports games (MMOSG), or first-person shooters (MMOFPS). Our proposed research framework presented below holds for all types of MMOGs.

Virtual worlds have been used to study and simulate activities in the real world. Virtual worlds have the potential to be used by political and social scientists to observe individual and collective patterns of online behavior in order to test social theories or develop new ones (Papargyris & Poulymenakou 2008). Researchers have examined criminal or disruptive behavior in virtual worlds such as money laundering (Elliott 2008) or grieving (Chesney et al. 2009). Jung & Kang (2009) investigated users’ purposes for using social virtual worlds and found that some people use them to escape from the real

world and to satisfy their social and hedonic needs. Klastrop & Tosca (2009) explored clothing and fashion inside virtual worlds. They found that players notice other players clothing and that fashion in the game world is a vehicle for individualization and personal storytelling.

Virtual worlds also have the potential to become laboratories where experiments in social science can test new norms, values, and institutions (Bainbridge 2010a). Virtual worlds have the potential to be proving grounds for real world social innovations, cultures, and social movements (Bainbridge 2009) as well as substituting for social institutions in the real world (Williams 2006). The unique nature of virtual worlds means that researchers of these worlds must be prepared to adapt to them and the social conventions and rules within. To guide researchers, Kozinets and Kedzior (2009) developed three characteristics of virtual worlds, *re-worlding*, *re-embodiment*, and *multiperspectivity*. These characteristics will be discussed next.

2.1 Re-Worlding

Re-worlding relates to how an apparently new world is experienced. It has a related concept of *plastic worldrules* which implies that the rules in virtual worlds are flexible. Schultze and Rennecker (2007) developed a classification scheme that characterizes virtual worlds between progressive or emergence rule structures and their degree of correspondence to reality or fantasy. This has consequences for the interpretation of reality inside virtual worlds. Each virtual world is different to the next. Some virtual worlds contain radical alterations of real-world physics, for example enabling avatars to fly or teleport, while others allow users to modify the environment around them such as deciding the time of day or altering weather conditions. Providing the user the ability to alter and shape their surroundings extends the identity of the avatar far beyond the body. Therefore virtual places can become representations of the virtual identity of users (Kozinets & Kedzior 2009).

2.2 Re-Embodiment

Users of virtual worlds must create an avatar which usually requires choosing its gender, race, appearance, and skills. The creation of an avatar is extremely important since the identity they create will affect how they are perceived by others (El Kamel 2009). Re-embodiment is where the user or researcher is required to select a new bodily form to represent him or herself in the virtual world (Kozinets & Kedzior 2009). There have been a number of studies which have examined virtual world identities including Bainbridge (2010b), Boellstorff (2008), Hagström (2008), Nardi (2010), and Tronstad (2008).

For IS researchers, this means that, if they are going to do some kind of online fieldwork, they must choose an avatar. The avatar they choose who will affect the way they are perceived by other users. Clearly, knowledge is required of the virtual world cultures and norms in question before embarking upon the research (Kozinets & Kedzior 2009). In World of Warcraft (WoW), for example, players are required to create a name, which is then displayed above the characters head and is how the character (and researcher) will be identified by others (Hagström 2008). The appearance of a character also has an impact on the capabilities of that character (Tronstad 2008). Therefore researchers must consider their virtual identity carefully before entering a virtual world community (Kozinets & Kedzior 2009).

2.3 Multiperspectivity

Users or researchers have the option of occupying more than one virtual world simultaneously (Fornäs et al. 2002; Moore et al. 2009) and can have multiple online bodies (Bainbridge 2010b; McKenna et al. 2010). The concept of multiperspectivity, or multiple perspectives and multiple bodies is also quite unique to researchers. Some users maintain just one avatar, while others have multiple avatars (Christopher 2009). For example, McKenna et al. (2010) used two characters to understand player experiences in WoW, Bainbridge (2010b) used twenty-two characters, while Nardi (2010) used just one. This unique concept of multiple bodies creates a challenge for researchers.

Gender swapping (Boellstorff 2008) is another expression of multiperspectivity. This has the potential to provide an opportunity to learn about virtual world experiences of the opposite sex (Kozinets & Kedzior 2009) or gender stereotypes in a virtual world (Bainbridge 2010b; Taylor 2006)

3 SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Historically, humans have engaged in collective action to achieve social or political change, or to pursue common goals (Goodwin & Jasper 2003). Social movements may seek political or economic liberation, fight for lifestyle changes, or raise awareness for their cause (Staggenborg 2011). Social movements are collective actions of certain levels of organization and duration which employ non-institutionalized methods to bring about social change (Staggenborg 2011) or increase social awareness (Vegh 2003).

New social movement (NSM) theory emphasizes new types of social movements, which emerged in advanced capitalist societies. Examples of new social movements include, women's, student, gay and lesbian, environmental, and peace movements (Staggenborg 2011). NSMs are focused on the collective search for identity where cultural and symbolic issues are associated with members belonging to differentiated social groups. Individuals seek new collectivities and social spaces to define their collective identity where they can experience and define novel lifestyles (Johnston et al. 1994). NSMs examine collective action based on culture, ideology, and politics, and define collective identities through alternative sources such as ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Buechler 1995). Three aspects of social movement are discussed below: mobilization and recruitment, movement organization, and strategies and campaigns.

3.1 Mobilization and Recruitment

Mobilization and recruitment of individuals for social movements has been an important focus for social movement research. Mobilization is the process whereby a group which shares interests or grievances gains collective control over resources (Tilly 1978), while recruitment of individuals is part of the mobilization process and also involves gathering other resources such as time and money (Staggenborg 2011). Resources created or used by social movements include but are not limited to: strategic know-how, organizational structures, movement infrastructures, networks of people, human resources, money, and office space (Edwards & McCarthy 2003; Staggenborg 2011). Mobilization and recruitment are ongoing processes within a social movement.

Mobilization of movements generally arises from large scale economic conditions (McAdam et al. 1988), political changes, opportunities and threats, or critical events (Staggenborg 2011). There are three central propositions for social movement mobilization (Jenkins 1981):

1. Some level of resources must be mobilized before groups can engage in collective action.
2. The mobilization of resources depends on the existence of some level of organization, whether that organization exists before the emergence of collective action or is formed as a result of it.
3. The translation of mobilization into collective action is related to the expected costs of investing in the collective action, the anticipated risks, and the anticipated gains.

The extent of organization among members of a group, and the resources controlled by the group are important factors in mobilization. If individuals share membership in organizations, they have a pre-existing network, resources, and leadership which can be mobilized. This allows for large amounts of people to be recruited rapidly (Oberschall 1973). There have been many studies illustrating that pre-existing social networks of people enable social movements to recruit people, as well as leadership which defines the issues and creates the social movement organization (McCarthy & Zald 1977).

3.2 Movement Organization

NSMs break from earlier industrial era movements that focused on the redistribution of wealth, and now focus on concerns for forms of lifestyles (Habermas 2008; Pichardo 1997). They promote direct

democracy, self-help groups, and collaborative styles of social organization (Pichardo 1997). NSM tactics tend to remain outside of normal political channels and use disruptive tactics to influence public opinion. They also employ pre-planned and highly dramatic forms of demonstration, often with costumes and other symbolic representations (Tarrow 1994). NSM organizational structure also differentiates them from earlier industrial era movements. NSMs tend to organize themselves in a fluid non-rigid style. They tend to vote communally on issues, rotate their leadership, and employ temporary ad hoc organizations. Thus, NSMs create open, decentralized, non-hierarchical structures that are responsive to the needs of individuals (Pichardo 1997).

Scott (1990) defines the following characteristics of NSMs: 1) they are primarily social, focusing on life styles and values and not directly political in character; 2) they are located within civil society and have little concern with the state; and 3) they focus on change through developing alternative lifestyles and changing values. Scott (1990) also discusses the organizational form of new social movements, they:

1. Are locally based, or centered around small groups;
2. Organize around specific and local issues;
3. Characterized by cycles of movement activity and mobilization, i.e. periods of high or low activity;
4. Have fluid hierarchies and loose systems of authority;
5. Have shifting memberships and fluctuating members.

3.3 Strategies and Campaigns

The strategies and campaigns a social movement employs are also of interest to researchers. There are many strategies and tactics a social movement can employ, such as demonstrations, petitions, press statements, public meetings, lobbying, displaying symbols of personal affiliation, or forming specialized associations dedicated to pursuing a cause (Staggenborg 2011).

The methods employed by a movement can shape the course of a movement and alter its perception to observers and potential participants. The goal of a social movement is to change the behavior of their opponents through persuasion or intimidation, and to undermine the opponent's credibility with the state, media, or public. If the opponent is the state, social movements aim to avoid repression, or change administrative rules, regulatory practices, policies and laws. They may use the media to undermine their opponents and spread their message, and from the larger public, social movements seek sympathy, changes in awareness, and contributions (Goodwin & Jasper 2003).

One popular tactic is to stage a sit in, for example for black rights (Morris 2003) or even "kiss-ins" for gay rights (Bernstein 2003; Winfield 2010). Marches are another common form of protest and can often include activities such as distributing pamphlets and carrying banners (Tilly & Wood 2009). Other tactics could include direct mail campaigns (Bosso 2005; Staggenborg 2011), or even simply refusing to purchase products made by a certain company or those which contain certain chemicals (McCloskey 1992). Violence is another form of collective action tactics, which often makes the news and draws attention to the movement's campaign. However, there is a growing acceptance of non-violent protest in contemporary social movements (Tarrow 1994).

4 VIRTUAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movement literature has, in recent times begun to investigate how social movements have used the Internet. The Internet has played an important role in initiating and steering activism (Postmes & Brunsting 2002) as movements take advantage of the Internet's capabilities in growing numbers, more social protest will take place online (Leizerov 2000). Brunsting and Postmes (2002) argue that the Internet affects the nature of collective action. Postmes and Brunsting (2002) suggest that the Internet has assumed a significant role in transforming collective action which ranges from confrontational to persuasive, and from individual activities to collective ones and is thriving in many areas. The Internet

has enabled mass communication which has succeeded in activating and mobilizing many people who may have previously been less politically active.

McCaughey and Ayers (2003) in their edited book refuse to define the boundaries of online activism or determine what counts as legitimate online activism. They believe that defining online activism is difficult and may take many forms such as, direct action, protests, self-help groups, educational groups, activist newspapers, cultural groups, and political bookstores. Vegh (2003) however, classifies activism over the Internet into three general areas: awareness/advocacy, organization/mobilization, and action/reaction.

Vegh (2003) states that the Internet can be used for mobilization in three different ways. Firstly it can be used to call for offline action such as a post on a website calling for a demonstration at a set time and place. Second, it can be used to call for action which may normally take place offline but is more effective if done online, such as contacting people through email. Third, the Internet can be used to call for online action which can only be carried out online, such as a massive spamming campaign. Vegh (2003) also states that online collective action could covers online attacks committed by hackers such as defacing websites and disrupting servers.

Social movements have also begun to proliferate through virtual worlds. Blodgett and Tapia (2010, 2011) analyzed a virtual protest against IBM Italian employees which occurred in Second Life. Blodgett and Tapia (2010) discussed a number of differences between real world and virtual world protests. The first being the identification of supporters when protests move to the virtual, as more distant participants can become involved. Second, establishment of hierarchy changes as hierarchies are now encoded into access and control rights. Third, getting the word out to participants enables a broader audience. Last, building solidarity through technology allows the size of personal networks to grow and allows distant strangers to find commonalities. Using the concept of digital protestainment, Blodgett and Tapia (2011) discussed virtual protests as a blend of work and play, work and entertainment, with each of these opposing forces impacting the way in which protest actions in a virtual world shape the eventual outcome.

McKenna et al. (2011) have gone further than just protest activities and examined how the organization of virtual world social movements changes from the real world versus the virtual world. Through netnographic research (Kozinets 2010) of a gay and lesbian social movement inside WoW, McKenna et al. (2011) apply the theoretical concepts of NSM and suggest that there are a number of similarities and differences between real world and virtual world social movements, namely in their locality, issues they represent, their periods of activity, the hierarchical structure of the movement, and the fluctuation of membership levels.

5 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

As social movements move into the virtual arena, a greater understanding of what virtual worlds mean for social movements is required. Researchers of social movements have studied what the Internet means for collective action (Blickstein & Hanson 2001; Leizerov 2000; McCaughey & Ayers 2003; Postmes & Brunsting 2002; Salter 2003). Despite virtual protests occurring often in virtual worlds (Abalieno 2005; Blodgett 2009; Blodgett & Tapia 2010; Castronova 2003; Robinson 2008), surprisingly little research has been conducted on social movements in virtual worlds. As McKenna et al. (2011) and Blodgett and Tapia (2010) illustrate, there are a number of differences between real world and virtual world social movements. Therefore we question the notion that virtual worlds are a proxy to real world social phenomena. The research framework presented next illustrates some key areas where IS researchers can study how the characteristics of virtual worlds change the way in which social movements organize and behave once they move into a virtual world arena.

Based on the literature presented in the previous section, we present the following research framework (See Table 1). The multi-dimensional framework is designed to capture the major issues for the study of virtual world social movements. The first dimension, *virtual worlds*, captures the three characteristics of virtual worlds discussed earlier viz. re-worlding, re-embodiment, and multiperspectivity. The second dimension, *social movements*, captures the three dimensions of

social movements discussed above, namely, mobilization and recruitment, organization, and strategies and campaigns. Using these dimensions, nine areas of importance are presented at the intersection of these dimensions which illustrate the main issues when studying virtual world social movements. The area VIII, for instance, is concerned with how re-embodiment affects the strategies and campaigns employed by a social movement, for example altering an avatar's appearance as a strategic tactic for a movement campaign. The framework intersects the literature from social movements and virtual worlds to illustrate some important questions for research into virtual world social movements.

		Virtual Worlds		
		Re-Worlding	Re-Embodiment	Multiperspectivity
Social Movements	Mobilization & Recruitment	I	II	III
	Organization	IV	V	VI
	Strategies & Campaigns	VII	VIII	IX

Table 1. Research Framework

5.1 Key Issues

This section will detail the key issues in studying virtual world social movements.

5.1.1 Mobilization and Recruitment

Social movements must mobilize and recruit new members in order to be effective (Jenkins, 1981). *Re-worlding* affects how social movement leaders may find potential participants, and how they control the potential resources of that world (Tilly 1978). An important issue involves how virtual worlds allow for group organization, and the technical requirements of finding people to join movements such as identifying pre-existing groups (McCarthy & Zald 1977; Oberschall 1973). For example, World of Warcraft (WoW) allows the construction of guilds (Brignall & VanValey 2007) which creates rigid group structures, however Second Life (SL) is more open (Messinger et al. 2008) and does not allow this. Some virtual worlds allow users to generate their own content and grant others access to use it (such as in SL), while others such as WoW offer systems to allow people to group together and provide procedures to add people to a group. Each virtual world has its own costs of being a member, for example monetary or time commitments. Therefore, just as social movements have costs (Edwards & McCarthy 2003; Staggenborg 2011), so do virtual world social movements. Virtual worlds have lessened the costs of protest, however movement leaders are required to involve more time, effort, and resources into organizing virtual movements (Blodgett & Tapia 2010). Therefore it is important to consider the costs of being part of a particular virtual world (such as subscription costs), the costs of being part of a movement (i.e. does a member have to contribute in game currency to the movement, or create virtual objects?), and the costs involved in leaders establishing the virtual movement (such as developing virtual spaces, or building groups of members). Virtual worlds may also provide new recruits the freedom to decide to participate in collective action without facing direct consequences to being part of that action (Postmes & Brunsting 2002), and may attract new members by creating objects seen to be of some value in the virtual world, i.e. digital placards (Blodgett & Tapia 2010).

Re-embodiment plays a different role in gaming virtual worlds compared with social virtual worlds. In a gaming world, characters create an avatar in a way which best increases its capabilities for in-game activities (Tronstad 2008). Therefore the boundaries between recruitment for membership based on movement goals, and recruitment for membership based on gaming activities become blurred. There are two types of players in a MMOG, *role-players*, who are satisfied with play as avatars, and *power gamers*, who get pleasure from accumulating experience points (El Kamel 2009). Therefore an important issue becomes how does a researcher validate those members who feel they are truly part of the movement, and those members who are more interested in game play? A social virtual world may offer completely different reasons why a member joins a movement as these worlds offer more

freedom in avatar creation and are more open to design freedom (Boellstorff 2008; Messinger et al. 2008), such as creation of virtual identities which better represent the user's real self (Vicdan & Ulusoy 2008). Therefore the nature and design of the virtual world is intertwined with the identities that a user creates, and their capacity to join virtual world social movements. There is also the chance for deception of movement leaders (Donath 1999), for example a woman's movement may only allow a real world female to join the movement. However just because an avatar is female does not imply that the user is female (Boellstorff 2008; Consalvo & Harper 2008; Kozinets & Kedzior 2009). It is also possible for users of virtual worlds to remain anonymous (Christopher 2009; Kozinets & Kedzior 2009) therefore this begs the question: do members of virtual world social movements know the true real world identities of all recruits, and is this important (Choi et al. 2009)?

It is possible for players to inhabit multiple virtual worlds simultaneously (Fornäs et al. 2002; Kozinets & Kedzior 2009; Moore et al. 2009), or have multiple avatars in one virtual world (Bainbridge 2010b; McKenna et al. 2010). Therefore *Multiperspectivity* is an important issue as it provides the opportunity for a user to join only some of his or her avatars to a movement, or to join a movement in multiple worlds. Therefore a researcher could potentially consider social movements in multiple virtual worlds (Blodgett 2009; Blodgett & Tapia 2011), or within a single world (Blodgett & Tapia 2010; Robinson 2008), and it is important to ask why a user joins the avatars that they do. This also should make a researcher query if a user has only one of their avatars as a member of a movement, does that make the user any less committed to the movement's goals? Another important issue resulting from this is related to the concept called the *free-rider problem*. This problem results from rational individuals becoming free riders because their goal of collective action is a collective good, such as seeking new rights for gays and lesbians, which the individual will receive regardless of whether or not he or she joins the movement (Staggenborg 2011). Hence, an important issue relating to multiperspectivity and the free-rider problem asks which is more important, the *users* who join virtual world movements, or the *avatars* they join or do not join.

5.1.2 Organization

Re-worlding has implications for the organization of virtual world social movements. Virtual worlds consist of virtual locations much as the real world consists of geographical locations (Ondrejka 2007; Robinson 2008). Some virtual worlds constrain avatars to certain virtual spaces, therefore virtual world social movements may also be constrained to virtual spaces. Another important issue relates to the designers of virtual worlds who Castronova (2005c) considers as "gods" who have full control over the entire world. This has important implications on how groups in these worlds organize as they can change at the designers will (McKenna et al. 2011). Social movements tend to create open, decentralized, and non-hierarchical structures (Pichardo 1997), however virtual worlds enable new mechanisms for leadership, structure, and hierarchy which creates hybridized structures between virtual world social movements and the virtual world (Blodgett & Tapia 2010; McKenna et al. 2011). The control designers hold over the virtual world also means that organizers of virtual protest could be banned from the virtual world (Blodgett 2009). Members of virtual worlds meet each other and bond through their avatars, however some members seek to meet each other offline (El Kamel 2009). Therefore a researcher may need to consider online and offline interactions between movement members (Blickstein & Hanson 2001).

Again *re-embodiment* has different implications between gaming and social virtual worlds. As was mentioned previously, gaming virtual worlds need to consider aspects of the game when recruiting new members. Consider WoW for example. It consists of various activities which require people to group together to complete difficult tasks (Quandt & Wimmer 2008). The makeup of the avatars' capabilities has an important impact on the outcome of the activity (McKenna et al. 2010; Tronstad 2008). Therefore virtual world social movements may be required to construct teams with certain characteristics to play certain roles. However, the non-hierarchical structures and responsiveness to individuals which exists in real world social movements (Pichardo 1997) may not exist in gaming virtual world social movements. The design of an avatar in these virtual worlds changes the way in which movements act, as movement activities are now more closely related to surviving the game. Within a social virtual world, however, these issues may not exist, for example SL is designed with an

open structure (Messinger et al. 2008), and users have more freedoms for avatar and object construction. Therefore a greater understanding is required between avatar construction, the design of the virtual world, and movement goals.

Multiperspectivity has implications for the organization of virtual world social movements in two aspects. The first is that virtual world social movements may exist in multiple virtual worlds. Therefore the concept of social movements being locally based (Scott 1990) becomes questionable. Rather than a movement being located in one real world geographical location, a virtual world movement may be instantiated in multiple virtual localities. Even if the same user occupies multiple virtual worlds, is the important issue for researchers the users' real world locality, of their virtual world locality (McKenna et al. 2011)? Virtual protests could take place in a single virtual location (Blodgett & Tapia 2010; Robinson 2008), or in multiple virtual locations within the same virtual world, or in different virtual worlds (Blodgett 2009). This raises the question of how do virtual world social movement leaders organize collective action across multiple virtual worlds, each with their own set of rules? The second aspect is the organization of users with multiple avatars. Membership levels in social movements often fluctuate (Scott 1990), however this effect may be greater in virtual world social movements (McKenna et al. 2011). Users may create multiple avatars, some of which may be members of a movement. Leaders of a movement will have to deal with issues of joining a current member's avatars, or limiting the numbers of avatars per user.

5.1.3 *Strategies and Campaigns*

Re-worlding is an important aspect because the nature of the virtual world has a strong influence on how a virtual world social movement implements its strategies and campaigns. For example, in SL protestors can create any object to aid their campaign such as digital placards or virtual spaces (Blodgett & Tapia 2010; Robinson 2008), but in WoW, users do not have freedom to create objects other than those which are already part of the game. It is important to consider what is necessary for collective action in virtual worlds. Just as in real world social movements, virtual world social movements can occupy a virtual space in order to disrupt activities (Robinson 2008). Virtual world social movements have other tools they can employ, such as holding virtual parades (Ryan 2009), or causing a server to crash because too many movement members have logged in which creates serious lags (Abaleno 2005; Castronova 2005b). Hence there are new constraints to virtual world social movements, such as a maximum number of members which can become involved in collective action before the technology begins to break down, or preventing more people from becoming involved in the campaign as server capacity reaches its maximum number of users.

Re-embodiment allows members of virtual worlds social movements new strategies of expressiveness for their movement campaigns. Virtual worlds allow players to express themselves in ways not possible in the real world (McKenna et al. 2011), for example appearing as a monster or a human. Schultze & Rennecker (2007) pose questions relating to avatar choice affecting communication in virtual world organizations between both the communicator and the audience, and if these methods of expressiveness enable or disrupt communication. Similar questions can be posed for virtual world social movements. If a movement leader uses a monster avatar during a campaign, does that affect the way the movement is perceived by outsiders, and is the movement considered to be more or less serious in this situation than if the leader had used a more human looking avatar? Another important question comes from the issue of trust. Avatar sophistication is an important aspect in avatar creation and trust, as is the presence of offline identity information (Choi et al. 2009). Therefore a researcher needs to consider how a movement creates awareness for their cause through the sophistication of their avatars. An important question to ask non-movement members could be how does a movement create trust for itself based on the appearance of the avatars within the movement, and is offline identity information necessary for them to take the movement seriously? Based on the research on virtual world fashion (Klastrup & Tosca 2009), and virtual identities (Bainbridge 2010b; Boellstorff 2008; Hagström 2008; Nardi 2010; Tronstad 2008), we can speculate that movement outsiders will take note of how a social movement represents itself to others. This seems to be a potential area for research.

Multiperspectivity allows for users to create multiple avatars which potentially allows a member of a virtual world social movement to select avatars to be part of a movement campaign. An important question for researchers is to understand why members may choose to log into one avatar for a campaign over the other avatars they have within the movement. Virtual worlds allow avatars magic-like behaviors (Blodgett & Tapia 2010), hence for a particular campaign a user may choose to use one avatar over another based on the magical capabilities of that particular avatar (Ducheneaut et al. 2006). A user may also be able to create a common character across multiple virtual worlds (Kozinets & Kedzior 2009), and thus get involved in a campaign across multiple worlds, potentially increasing awareness of the movement. Users may also use other campaign techniques such as gender swapping (Boellstorff 2008; McKenna et al. 2011) as a strategic tactic for a movement campaign (Ryan 2009). This concurs with Tarrow (1994) that NSMs often employ pre-planned and highly dramatic forms of demonstration, often with costumes and other symbolic representations, however in ways not possible in the real world. Therefore, not only does a researcher need to understand the virtual world, they also need to consider new forms of interactions and ways of expressiveness which may have no counterpart in the real world (Kozinets & Kedzior 2009).

6 CONCLUSION

As social movements move into the virtual arena, a greater understanding of the relationships between social movements and virtual worlds is required. In this paper we presented a multi-dimensional research framework designed to address the major issues relating to the study of virtual world social movements. The purpose of this framework is to address the major differences in studying social movements in the virtual world versus the real world. Past research has argued that virtual worlds are a proxy to studying real world social phenomena, however we disagree with this and argue that there may be similarities as well as differences between the two, (see McKenna et al. 2011).

Researchers addressing this issues presented in this framework have a variety of methodological approaches they can utilize. For a discussion of potential virtual world methodological approaches, see Schultze & Orlikowski (2010).

Of course, we do not claim to have addressed all of the current key issues in this area, however, the issues listed here are based on our review of the literature in the areas of sociology, virtual communities, and virtual worlds research. We believe our proposed framework is a potential starting point for researchers wanting to understand the relationships between social movements and virtual worlds.

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