

Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games
Edward Castronova
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When new technologies are introduced they seem exotic, but successful ones are soon assimilated into everyday life. Most of us can no longer survive without them — cars, television, plastics and even books are examples of world-changing technologies. They are now inextricably embedded in our lives.

Synthetic Worlds is about a new technology that creates worlds you can inhabit. Currently, these new worlds have around 20 million inhabitants and a GDP per capita that, if you want to look at it this way, exceeds India's. If nothing else, this book argues, synthetic worlds are a growing economic force to be reckoned with. Certainly they have already made and lost real fortunes.

If you haven't visited one, you probably know nothing about them and the opportunities. Synthetic worlds are popular: the total number of players is expected to reach 40 million by 2020. Lawyers, economists, anthropologists, psychologists, traders and computer scientists are working there. That is, not the humans but the characters they play in these worlds fulfil these roles in their synthetic societies.

Imagine how you can get caught up in a good novel; now imagine you were in the novel's world and became an active part of the story, not just a passive reader. You'd get caught up in the story; then imagine adding markets and an economic system, with currency and wages. Think how addictive realistic video games can be, but add thousands of simultaneous players all playing different characters. Some people already spend far too much time watching TV or playing ordinary computer games; synthetic worlds are even more seductive.

Not only do people spend more and more time in synthetic worlds, but a few even make an income from their activities entirely in the worlds. There are, for instance, web sites that sell designer clothes to wear in synthetic worlds, and of course the clothes cost real money. The synthetic world frontiersmen are experiencing a turning point much like the Europeans' discovery of America, and, if you want to be enthusiastic about it like the author of this book, possibly a discovery that will turn out to be quite as significant.

Edward Castronova was a professional academic economist, and his book grew out of his initial amusement with the toy economics of synthetic worlds. He wrote a light-hearted paper about the markets and cultures of these worlds, but the idea ended up gripping him, and he wrote a ground-breaking and widely read paper. He died — virtually, that is — several times writing it; perhaps a first for an academic article.

Synthetic worlds are surprisingly sophisticated. Castronova's discussions of common good, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and positives like relationships, mentoring and adventure are clearer than usual because they are focussed on life in simpler worlds than the real one. Synthetic worlds allow choices and changes to cultural habits that would be unthinkable in the real world we live in. Experiments in synthetic worlds can be seen as challenging our habitual ways of thinking and organising our real lives. Arguably, our real world has already got considerable problems with globalisation, terrorism, trade barriers and the like; it could help to experiment in synthetic worlds with alternatives. Indeed, synthetic worlds started as a computerisation of war gaming — certainly, it is preferable to experiment with wars in synthetic worlds than in the real world.

It's likely that people who increasingly live in synthetic worlds will find the real world more and more tedious. Reality is a lot more inconvenient and cramped than fantasy. Why get married or have children in the real world when they are such a complicated commitment? Why pay taxes;

or, conversely, if I have to pay taxes buying a house in real life, why don't I also pay tax when I buy a magic wand in a synthetic world? Who would get the tax? One 'estate agent' working part-time in an synthetic world gets more real income than they do working in this world as a school teacher? Why bother being a schoolteacher, then?

Why not change the laws of real worlds to work as efficiently as in synthetic worlds? When we work out whether a digital house is a house, a work of art, or a patentable idea, maybe we should change real property laws? Why not experiment with alternative lifestyles inside these worlds; play at being a man or woman, doctor or priest, before trying these lifestyles out in reality? You could impose your religious or other views on people, or you could distribute important things for free that you think this world parcels out unfairly. You could experiment with any policy, try it out, then bring it back refined into this world. You can build a world that embodies any rules you want to have, or you can hunt around and find a congenial one that's already up and running.

Ironically, a lot of synthetic worlds require their players to renounce many real world rights, such as freedom of speech, the right to trial by peers, and having a free press in order to play. What does having a free press mean in a synthetic world? A player could start a newspaper, but by renouncing their real world rights, they are allowing the organisers of the game arbitrarily to limit their freedom of expression. This makes some sense for legal reasons in the real world, but then what do we make of the multinational companies placing products, taking real things *from* the real world and placing them in the synthetic worlds? Already real police have intervened in cases of theft in synthetic worlds, and arguments have progressed to real courts and real fines. Clearly the depth of commitment players feel to these worlds is going to create interesting tensions. Castronova is breathlessly enthusiastic, but the cynic in me thinks they are no different from anything else; already, we could point out, football is played by zillions of people, and the police have got involved in cases of cheating (and no doubt some players have murdered each other). Goodness knows, the GDP of a few football players exceeds all India's.

Football might be a training ground for gamesmanship but, unlike synthetic worlds, it isn't going to contribute much to the international debate about globalisation. Castronova draws a good point from football, however. While it may seem fantastic that so many people put their energy into such things, many people do find it quite normal to get very excited kicking balls around. Football takes up a lot of peoples' time and energy, and affects finance and health. Indeed, a lot of people literally live for it.

You are perfectly free to think the World Cup is a contrived distraction, but don't voice that thought out loud in a public place! Next time, then, when you opine on synthetic worlds, either say they are the way of the future — or make sure you are among ignorant friends who have neither lived in one nor read Castronova's book. The future is worth taking more seriously.

Harold Thimbleby is Professor of Computer Science and
Director of the Future Interaction Technologies Laboratory, Swansea University.