Towards Considerations beyond Dichotomies: The Study of Material Culture faces challenges in Online Playgrounds

Michaela Rizzolli[i]

PhD student in Educational Science
Institute for History and European Ethnology
University of Innsbruck
E-mail: michaela.rizzolli@uibk.ac.at

Abstract

This paper problematizes dichotomous thinking in academia, exemplified by the study of material culture in online playgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to deepen our understanding of how dichotomies can lead to misconceptions and misrepresentations of phenomena. This paper argues that there are three dichotomies which account for a number of difficulties in dealing with material culture in online playgrounds: First, the critical division between the material and non-material dimensions of material culture. Second, the distinction between immaterial and material space. Third, the dichotomy between real and virtual. Instead of using a "dichotomous" way of thinking, the article advocates an "interdependent" way of thinking.

Keywords: ECER, Material Culture, Digital Material, MMORPGs, Dichotomies

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century studies of material culture were associated with museum anthropology. By the mid-20th century material culture had become a neglected research subject (Heidrich, 2001). By the end of the century material culture had begun to receive growing attention from academic fields as diverse as anthropology, archaeology, literary studies, history, psychology, sociology, and education science (König, 2005). The exponential growth of scientific publications on material culture, the emergence of a demand for increasing research in this area, and a multidisciplinary attraction for material culture mark a paradigm shift in the humanities: known as the "material turn".

According to Hauser (2000), the "material turn" should be understood as an attempt to assure oneself of the physical environment in a world where new media have taken precedence. Likewise, Scharfe (2005) describes the increasing volume of research concerning materiality as a result of the

dominance of virtuality. The emergence of digitality and the paradigm shift towards materiality, material objects, and material artefacts within diverse academic cultures has resulted in various distinctions, dichotomies and juxtapositions in academia.

Dichotomies

Specifically, this paper invites you to think about the role of dichotomies in academia. According to Kirschner (2006), dichotomies occur frequently in scientific discourse. In line with the definition given by Wikipedia, he refers to dichotomy as the division of something into two halves. Firstly, this division is "mutually exclusive"; nothing can belong simultaneously to both parts. Each side has its own rules, values, slogans and norms. Secondly, this division is "jointly exhaustive"; everything must belong to one part or the other. The key problem of dichotomies is that they force one to opt for one side or the other.

The dangers of dichotomous thinking are exemplified in the present paper through the study of material culture in online playgrounds. The theoretical considerations are based on my research experience during my doctoral research project on *Material Culture in Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games*. The project focuses on the relationship between gamers and various "digital objects", such as buildings, weaponry, pets, and jewellery encountered by gamers in "Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs)". These items might be embedded in modes of sociality, might be negotiated when players engage with the digital environment or might even become subjects. The aim of my dissertation is to foster our understanding of material culture in online playgrounds.

Material culture in online playgrounds

The primary concern in studies of material culture is the "mutual relations between people and objects" (Woodward, 2007, p. 14). This point is supported by Miller (2008), who has illustrated in several studies on material culture that the analysis of objects tells us something about the ways people relate to each other, as well as about the ways they relate to themselves. Moreover, material culture studies are based on the assumption that the analysis of relationships between persons and things is an important source for learning about how culture is transmitted, received and produced. In brief, scholars of material culture studies "engage with the minutiae of everyday life while retaining [...] a commitment to understanding humanity as a whole" (Miller, 2008, p. 6).

In the wake of recent digitalisation and the transition from material to digital an increasing number of people engage with different digital technologies, digital platforms and digital worlds. In September 2012, the Journal of Material Culture published a special issue dedicated to *Digital Subjects and Cultural Objects*. This issue emphasises that an increasing number of people are becoming ""digital subjects"- social actors whose experiences, thoughts and relationships play out through and across an ever-expanding variety of digital platforms" (Salmond, 2012, p. 213). In interacting with the digital environment "digital subjects" meet various "digital objects" such as the internet, software, application or code. The authors of the aforementioned publication are unanimous that since an increasing proportion of people are becoming "digital subjects" - and are therefore engaged with "digital objects" - "digital worlds" are of paramount importance for the study of material culture.

According to Rodney (2009), to date digital material culture has attracted scant scholarly attention. In his article *Excavating Second Life*, Rodney expounds on the concept of "cyber archaeology", developed by Jones in 1997. Jones proposed a new way of understanding digital communities through the study of cultural artefacts. In contrast to Jones (1997), who analysed

technologies used by digital communities, Rodney (2009) studied digital objects created by people within "cyber-space". His study consists of a series of observations in "Second Life" regarding the digital material culture and, in particular, it focuses on digital places conserved as "heritage" within "Second Life". Jones and Harrison draw the attention of classical archaeology to digital settlements and examine the possibilities and limitations of cyber-archaeology. Recently, Horst and Miller (2012) published a book entitled *Digital Anthropology*, where they bring key anthropologists of digital culture together. Through a range of case studies on Google Earth, Facebook, and Second Life the book explores the question of how human and digital can be defined in relationship to each other and how humanity is constantly manifested differently across the cultures. This work embraces various aspects of digital culture without specifically focusing on digital material culture.

In my view, the study of material culture faces challenges in online playgrounds. I argue that the difficulties in addressing material culture in online playgrounds are threefold: First, the critical division between material and non-material dimensions of material culture. Second, the distinction between immaterial and material space. Third, the dichotomy between real and virtual. This paper will examine each of these dichotomies in greater depth. In doing so, the article will shed light on some dichotomies in academia which give rise to problems, points of conflicts and misconceptions. This paper aims to move beyond binary oppositions by questioning dichotomous ways of thinking and thereby transcending binaries.

Material versus non-material culture

The first dichotomy focuses on the term material culture - a somewhat vague term that carries ambivalent meanings. On the one hand, material culture refers to objects that are material. This point of view places emphasis on the physical aspect of objects. Objects are comprised of matter and form. They are light or heavy; their surfaces have very specific tangible properties. On the other hand, the term material culture considers various non-physical applications of which material culture is composed. These non-material dimensions include any mental or ideational aspect of material culture (Hahn, 2005). People surround themselves with the most bizarre and mundane objects. They do so not only because material objects fulfil material needs, but also because material objects acquire significance and meanings in the course of people's lives (Hahn, 2005; Kramer, 1995). To a large extent material and non-material dimensions are analysed in parallel rather than put into a networked relation. This is because these studies have failed to take into account the fact that culture consists of material and non-material dimensions.

The binary opposition of the material and non-material dimensions of culture were reinforced by the emergence of digitality. According to Hirschberger (2010), digitality generates altered and intangible things while transforming the material objects into an electrical, technological or virtual trace. Since the emergence of new media, several authors express their concern about the disappearance of material dimensions of culture in the digital age. Selle (1997) discusses the question of which things will endure the age of images and simulations. In his view material objects are sentenced to death. Likewise, Flusser (1999) brings to our attention the disappearance of things and the appearance of "Non-Things" (p. 85). He argues that our environment is no longer made up of physical objects. Instead, it is composed of 'Non-Things', and of information. According to Negroponte (1996), "the change from atoms to bits is irrevocable and unstoppable" (p. 4). The world is moving towards an "Information Superhighway" (Negroponte, 1996, p. 12). The new objects are no longer characterized by form and matter, but rather by immateriality, transparency and weightlessness. The world "is marked by a transformation of

atoms into bits and of matter into mind" (van den Boomen, Lammes, Lehmann, Raessens, & Schäfer, 2009).

Recently, there has been an increasing amount of literature on "digital objects" as virtual goods, engaging with key debates in contemporary consumption studies. For example, Martin (2008) has investigated the use-value, exchange-value and role of virtual goods in "Second Life". Her study shows that virtual goods "lack any use-value in terms of physical needs". In fact, virtual goods in "Second Life" are used primarily for virtual representation and serve as symbols of status, individuality and belonging. By contrast, Landay (2008) published an essay in the Journal of Virtual Worlds Research, where she criticizes commodification and consumerism in "Second Life" as something one does when one does not know what else to do. But a year later she admits that she had "underestimated some important aspects of virtual goods" (Landay, 2008). In her second paper entitled *Rethinking Virtual Commodification or, The Virtual Kitchen Sink* she highlights the social aspect of owning something in a virtual world (Landay, 2009). Unlike Landay (2009), Lehdonvirta (2010) investigates the attribution of cultural meanings to virtual goods. "The results of this research show that people consume virtual goods for much the same reasons they consume material goods: to establish social status and live up to the expectations of their peer groups, to build and express identity, and to seek solutions to problems, real or imagined" (p. 886). Diverse as these works were in character and style, they all focused on consumer culture and virtual goods. Existing accounts fail to resolve the contradiction between material and non-material, regardless of the deep insights gained by preliminary studies into the nature of our current consumer culture in digital spaces.

Digital objects are addressed as non-material ones and the non-material dimensions such as values, meanings and social relations of material culture have precedence over the material ones. They have tended to overlook the material dimensions of material culture in online spaces, whereas material and non-material dimensions are simultaneously opposed and intertwined. As van den Boomen et al. (2009) state in the volume *Digital Material* "material objects can take on many forms and formats. [...] When it comes to digital material, the lines separating objects, actions, and actors are hard to draw, as they are hybridized in technological affordances, software configurations and user interfaces" (p. 10). Meanings, political-ideological tendencies and values are treated as incorporated elements in materiality rather than as a metaphysical substance floating in digital space. This volume does not mention of material objects as material or non-material, but as "in-material" (van den Boomen et al., 2009, p. 9). This term, introduced by Schäfer (2008), defines digital material as "incorporated in materiality" (van den Boomen et al., 2009, p. 9). In other words, "digital material has to be in another material" (Lehmann, 2012, p. 168). The volume *Digital Material* is an attempt to move beyond the material versus non-material model and proposes a material understanding of different digital artefacts. I argue that in order to examine material culture online we have to take into account the material and non-material dimensions of digital objects and of digital space.

Digital spaces are immaterial

This leads us to another notion that is taken for granted: digital spaces are immaterial. In the 1990s popular discourse interpreted the emergence of technologies and new media as an unprecedented revolution of the material world. Several authors (Flusser, 1999; Negroponte, 1996; Selle, 1997) predicted a new world, a "new home of Mind" (Barlow, 2007): the "Cyberspace" (Gibson, 2003). Scholars portrayed a world in which the physical past was razed to the ground or reduced to ashes. They waved goodbye to material objects.

This particular *Zeitgeist* is cogently expressed in Barlow's (1996) "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*"*. He states: "There is no matter here" and no rules or legal concepts based on matter, because Cyberspace is a "global social space" situated outside the known borders. He argues in favour of the dissociation of Cyberspace from the material and real world.

Real versus virtual

The dichotomous conception of virtual in opposition to real is strongly related to the previous material versus immaterial model.

The real versus virtual model is a leftover from the early thinking about the internet. Networked mediated communication was conceptualized as activity and space distinct from the real world (Lehdonvirta, 2010b). Moreover, Bray and Konsynski (2007) claim that "Internet has been about virtually disconnecting from one's body" (p. 22). New media were considered as removed spaces, detached from reality and materiality. The world was portrayed as being new, quite different from the old one.

Also, Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) were presented as separate worlds, located outside the old and real world within the dichotomous "real world" versus "virtual world" model. According to Lehdonvirta (2010), the terms "in-game" and "out-of-game" are based on the assumption that "the game" and "the rest of the world" are independent of each other and are distinctive. This conception draws a clear dividing line between "inside" and "outside" (Copier, 2007, p. 133). Moreover, online playgrounds are regarded as being magic. The "magic circle" concept was introduced by Salen and Zimmerman (2003) and became an influential concept in the field of Game Studies. Salen and Zimmerman adopted the term "magic circle" from the Dutch historian Huizinga. Zimmerman and Salen used the term "magic circle" as a metaphor to illustrate that games are located outside of everyday life, within their own boundaries of space and time, and liberated from material interests and moral consequences. "In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 96). The authors create an imaginary reality where distinct boundaries of space and time evolve by separating games from "real" or "ordinary" life.

In recent years, several scholars have heavily criticized the concept of the "magic circle". In contrast to Salen and Zimmerman (2003), who interpret "*game space* as an isolated *magical* wonderland" (Copier, 2007, p. 133), Copier suggests a cross-medial understanding of experiences of play in order to move beyond the real-virtual dichotomy. Copier (2007; 2009) argues that Huizinga referred to the "magic circle" merely as an example of a playground. Also, Frissen, de Mul, and Raessens (2013) point out that Huizinga used the term "magic circle" only four times in his book *Homo Ludens*: twice to list different sorts of playgrounds, and twice in very general sense. In fact, Huizinga's (1995) study of the play-element in culture highlights the central role of play in human culture.

However, the magic circle concept and cyberspace separatism are influential concepts, from which current researchers still draw their research design. Lehdonvirta (2010b) argues that much influential scholarship on Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) is rooted in the "magic circle" concept in game studies and the cyberspace separatism of early Internet thinking. In his paper *Virtual Worlds Don't Exist* he questions the real versus virtual dichotomy and discusses various dimensions of this dichotomous model. He argues that all dimensions of the real-virtual dichotomy, such as virtual worlds

versus real worlds, virtual economy versus real economy, virtual identity versus real identity, virtual population versus real population, and virtual law versus real law are seriously flawed. For example, players sell their in-game items on trading sites for real-world money. For this reason we need to accept that we now live in a hybrid environment made of intertwined and overlapping systems, constantly interlinked, both real and virtual, online and offline.

As early as in 2006, Taylor discusses the false assumption that arises from the real-virtual model: "To imagine we can segregate these things - game and non-game, [...] virtual and real - not only misunderstands our relationship with technology, but our relationship with culture" (p. 153). Copier (2009) has also argued that the concepts of cyber separatism and magic circle are problematic because they hide the ambiguity and complexity of actual games and play. To answer the question of where virtual space ends and where the real world begins is therefore an impossible undertaking.

Interdependence

As seen in the previous chapter new media were constantly situated within a dichotomous order: material versus immaterial on the one hand and real versus virtual on the other hand. This binary order marks a clear dividing line between "here" and "out there". "Here" is characterized by materiality and reality, and "out there" is framed as immaterial and virtual. Furthermore, studies on material culture address material and non-material dimensions of material culture as opposed categories.

I would argue that in order to address the challenges of material culture studies in a digital age it is necessary to move beyond the dichotomous ways of thinking. Guilds in "World of Warcraft" meet in offline settings, and make their presence known in forums, chats and video sharing sites, so that a strict demarcation between real and virtual is no longer appropriate. Furthermore, technological specificities as well as the socio-political relations and the effects on social realities are an inherent aspect of new media (Lehdonvirta, 2010b). Therefore, a clear distinction between material and immaterial is obsolete.

Instead of using a dichotomous way of thinking, I argue in line with Kirschner (2006) for an "interdependent" way of thinking. According to the Macmillan dictionary, "interdependent" is an adjective which describes ""things" related to one another in such a close way that each one needs the others in order to exist." Wikipedia describes "Interdependence" as a relationship in which each member is mutually responsible to and dependent on others. According to Kirschner (2006), in this definition it is fairly evident that interdependence consists of two elements: first, an independent aspect (i.e. individual responsibility) and second a dependent one (i.e. dependent upon others). Kirschner proposes this term in the context of interdependent learning. He uses this term to conceptualize education as a system composed of interdependent elements. To speak of "digital" objects as "interdependent material" allows the material qualities and the symbolic meanings of 'digital' objects to be addressed as a tangled web of interdependent elements, which are at the same time dependent on and independent of each other. I use the term "interdependent" to define material and immaterial dimensions of material culture in digital spaces as simultaneously opposed and intertwined.

Conclusion

In this paper I have proposed that the study of material culture in online environments is a bold venture (1) as long as the term material culture implies a division of material and non-material dimensions of material culture, (2) as long as digital spaces are perceived within a dichotomous material versus

immaterial model, and (3) as long as digital spaces are situated within a real-virtual dichotomy. Even though a change in thinking about these dichotomies can be perceived, this paper has shown that there is a significant body of literature rooted in these seemingly self-evident notions. Although recent studies have made an attempt to move beyond dichotomies, this paper has highlighted the fact that dichotomies are utterly compelling. These compelling analogies also influence the conceptual framework from which researchers draw their research design. On the one hand, dichotomies are "mutually exclusive", while on the other, they are "jointly exhaustive".

For this reason I see a need to call into question the established dichotomies in academic discourse. I argue that in order to work towards a multilingual, multicodal and multicontextual understanding of key concepts and key issues in Learning, Education, Media and Culture considerations beyond dichotomies are necessary, because, - as exemplified by the field of material culture studies in a digital era - dichotomies become implicit, compelling, and give rise to false assumptions.

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