

**"Rethinking Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century: A Toolbox for Engaging the Hearts and Minds of the Open Source Generation"**

Joshua S. Fouts  
Director, Center on Public Diplomacy  
University of Southern California  
fouts@usc.edu  
<http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com>  
213-740-1786

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**Abstract**

This paper highlights a generational shift in the way that technology is being used as both venue for and facilitator of intercultural dialogue. It proposes there is an opportunity for the public diplomacy community to reconsider its current tools of engagement and explore now how best to engage -- on its own terms -- a generation for whom agile use of emergent technology tools is the norm. It places particular emphasis on the use of online games as a venue for cultural dialogue -- preliminary research has already shown a high degree of international exchange occurs within these "virtual worlds." Because government and bureaucracy often can be slow to move to adapt new and emergent technologies into their "public diplomacy toolboxes," this paper also hopes to be a clarion call highlighting potential avenues of access.

## **"Rethinking Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century: A Toolbox for Engaging the Hearts and Minds of the Open Source Generation"**

*"Polls show that youth are more likely to have an affinity for American values, especially when they have Internet access."*

*Hady Amr, Saban Center*

*"The Need to Communicate: How to Improve U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Islamic World"*

*The Brookings Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World*

### **Introduction**

While not the focus of his original report, Hady Amr's comment above touched on a critical generational shift in how information and ideas about the world are being shaped with the Internet as core catalyst. The Internet itself, however, is but the vehicle. What is in radical transition now is the ever-expanding variety of venues one can choose from in which to explore and experience new ideas. From cell phones for both voice and text chat, to instant messaging across multiple platforms, to bulletin boards, personal websites, blogs, to virtual communities such as "Habbo Hotel" and "Second Life" to massively multiplayer online games, the options grow by the day.

I want to pose a potentially radical thought: Can the shared experiences in massively multiplayer online games shape and supplement foreign policy?

While I leave you with that thought, a bit of context.

The conventional pop-cultural image of the diplomat as defined by popular culture is that of elites mixing with other elites in vaulted ceilings hashing out world problems for their respective governments. The role of public diplomacy by contrast, it could be argued, is to communicate with the masses, whether it be broadcasting or by bringing real people together with other real people to facilitate cultural understanding and, one might argue, facilitate peace from the ground up. The gaming world is playing that role. Real people from different cultures are coming together, building relationships, and defining their culture, country and views on other cultures

and countries. Connections among the people is possibly more important than connections among elites.

This essay will discuss 1) background and foundations of public diplomacy; 2) How it is relevant to the online gaming world. 3) How it is changing with the advent of new technologies, and 4) Data we have to suggest a role for MMOs and virtual worlds in the public diplomacy process.

## **Background**

Over the past decade, communications technologies have evolved more rapidly than has our ability to understand them. Since the early 1990s, we have witnessed a communication revolution, fueled by advances in computer technology, mobile and wireless communication, new information communication technologies, the expansion of broadcast through cable television and most significantly, the Internet.

One element of this transformation has been the emergence of “many-to-many” networks, communication networks that allow large numbers of users to communicate with each other, without interference from gatekeepers, regulators or editorial influence. The global information culture is fundamentally shifting from a broadcast environment to a topology where broadcast amplifies, and is amplified by, many-to-many networks that are increasingly enabled by information technologies – including web services, publicly accessible databases, social software (weblogs, wikis, buddy lists, online games, file-sharing networks), mobile devices (camera phones, text messaging, global positioning systems), and the tools and technologies that blur the line between online and real-world spaces (web cams, wi-fi, distributed sensors, Internet cafes, MeetUp and other smart-mob phenomena).

This transformation of the global information culture has deep and fundamental implications for politics and public diplomacy – dampening (or reversing) the effectiveness of traditional public diplomacy campaigns while opening up new opportunities that are not on the radar of public affairs people doing “business as usual.” For example, relationships formed in the virtual gaming world transcend traditional geopolitical and geosocial boundaries; weblogs played a key role in the last Korean election, and text messages sparked rallies during the recent Spanish elections. Radical movements of every political stripe, from left-wing antiglobalists to religious fundamentalists (Christian, Muslim, Hindu), are fully conversant with the dynamics of these technologies, while their governments are not. The bureaucratic obesity of national governments,

including our own, often precludes awareness of, much well informed less response to, these emergent phenomena as they happen.

These changes present new research challenges, as well as new opportunities for developing projects with long-term, real world social impact.

### **Purpose**

I am attempting to understand the relationships between many-to-many technologies – networked interaction on a mass scale – and public diplomacy. My goal in this essay will be to describe how massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) or "virtual worlds" can facilitate intercultural dialogue among various groups and in turn serve a broader goal of becoming a venue for successful public diplomacy.

### **What is Public Diplomacy?**

Before we go any further, it is important, perhaps, to provide a definition of public diplomacy. Traditional definitions of public diplomacy include government-sponsored cultural, educational and informational programs, citizen exchanges and broadcasts used to promote the national interest of a country through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign audiences.

The USC Center on Public Diplomacy (CPD) views the field much more broadly. In addition to government sponsored programs, the Center is equally concerned with aspects of what CPD board member, Joseph Nye has labeled "soft power." The Center studies the impact of private activities -- from popular culture to fashion to sports to news to the Internet -- that inevitably, if not purposefully, have an impact on foreign policy and national security as well as on trade, tourism and other national interests. Moreover, the Center's points of inquiry are not limited to U.S. governmental activities, but examine public diplomacy as it pertains to a wide range of institutions and governments around the globe.

Unlike standard diplomacy, which might be described as the ways in which government leaders communicate with each other at the highest levels, public diplomacy focuses on the ways in which a country (or multi-lateral organization such as the United Nations), acting deliberately or inadvertently, through both official and private individuals and institutions, communicates with citizens in other societies. But like standard diplomacy, it starts from the premise that dialogue, rather than a sales pitch, is often central to achieving the goals of foreign policy. To be effective, public diplomacy must be seen as a two-way street. It involves not only shaping the message(s)

that a country wishes to present abroad, but also analyzing and understanding the ways that the message is interpreted by diverse societies and developing the tools of listening and conversation as well as the tools of persuasion.

Formerly the province of Propaganda Studies scholars, study of Public Diplomacy has declined over the past 40 years. In fact, it had fallen in such disfavor that the Edward R. Murrow Center at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, originally known as the “Edward R. Murrow Center for Public Diplomacy,” for many years dropped the term “Public Diplomacy” from its moniker. (In the past six months the term was reattached to the Center’s title.) To wit, the Murrow Center is attributed with coining the term “public diplomacy”.

### **The Challenge to Keep Current**

There are a number of factors that work against the public diplomacy establishment from keeping current with today’s technology.

#### *Not a Scholarly Culture*

Typically, one who enters the foreign service will not expect the government to fund continued education. What you come in with is generally what you retire with. As a high level diplomat in this administration recently told me, “the foreign service is not a scholarly culture. It is a function of the craft – they do not experience the ‘downtime’ that their brothers and sisters in the defense branches experience.” Taking leave from the government for continued education in the academy is not supported, much less considered a viable career move for advancement. By contrast, the U.S. Department of Defense has a robust culture of mid-career training, with many high-ranking officers with advanced degrees. In fact, high-ranking officers often reach that rank because of the advanced degrees they have received while detailed to study.

As if things weren’t bad enough, practitioners of public diplomacy in the U.S. state department are not rewarded for choosing the line of work. In a March 22, 2005 speech by United Nations Foundation president Timothy Wirth, Wirth argued, “the promotion boards reward what is called the political cone, and career advancement makes it harder for public diplomacy to be rewarded in career service.” That is, those that chose public diplomacy as a profession are less likely to achieve top career rank – that being the rank of ambassador – if they pursue this field.

### *Late Adopters*

When I joined the USIA in 1992, I came out of a university environment where I had email and Internet access, with numerous early iterations of chat. I entered an organization where the famed green glow of the “Wang” computer was the order of the day. Email off-campus was a cumbersome process. Many of the reasons for the government’s delay were rooted in valid issues of security, budget constraints, but essentially different priorities.

So what are those priorities?

### **The Job of a Public Diplomat**

#### *Components and Purpose*

The traditional core “tool box” of a public diplomacy foreign service officer in the field could be summarized, for the sake of simplicity of consisting broadly of: funds to host events and showcase original “live” U.S. art and culture (such as bringing musicians, lecturers or art exhibitions to the country); pre-printed books, music and magazines for distribution; and funds to send qualified candidates to the U.S. for short or long-term stay (programs such as the Fulbright, Jefferson or Humphrey Fellows). Typically the international broadcasting outlets run independent of the post.

Indeed, the “bread and butter” of any traditional foreign service officer in a far flung country is often to identify promising individuals in country who are likely to have influential careers in their country and send them to the U.S. for a study abroad experience (say, for example a Fulbright Scholarship) or a professional visit (often under the auspices of the International Visitors Program).

The public diplomacy purpose of these programs is, ostensibly, to educate and inform publics about the United States. By allowing people to meet other U.S. citizens and to engage in free-form exchange of ideas in an unmediated environment the hope is that people will, when they return to their country of origin, retain a lasting positive feeling about the United States. Other goals include helping to promote democratic values, human rights and so forth. Clearly these tools are considered valuable and important to the U.S. public diplomacy establishment: In 2005 alone, Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice committed to boost the U.S. exchange programs budget by tens of millions of dollars.

In past years embassies have added websites to their outreach efforts, American Corners is a good example. In these venues, the message can be influenced by the post. But funding is limited.

Could these same core values and experiences be occurring in different venues for a different generation? Can this kind of effect be obtained elsewhere? Perhaps Virtually?

### **Virtual Worlds?**

I believe that Virtual Worlds contain the necessary elements to merit consideration as potential tools for public diplomacy. As alluded to above, at present, the farthest any foreign ministry (U.S. and beyond) has gone in terms of using new technologies, is to add websites to their public diplomacy toolbox. While websites are certainly informative and useful for those seeking information about country, they do not facilitate the level of dialogue necessary.

Virtual worlds, mainly constructed through massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), function as communication networks in three different ways:

- As one-to-many networks (developer to community). Virtual worlds, in other words, are created by a team of developers and include assumptions, values and beliefs in the structure, design, and art of the game.
- As many-to-many networks. Virtual worlds are networked communication systems, which allow for interactive chat, internal email, and private and public messaging. Communication can occur among and between any of the online participants in a multitude of configurations.
- As one-to-many networks (player to community). Virtual worlds also offer individual players increasing access to a new form of “broadcast.” from things as basic as avatar appearance and selection to the ability to create and display objects or messages in public forums or virtual space.

Each of these spaces provides us with research questions that can help us to better understand the role of virtual worlds in public diplomacy.

### **Case Study: Star Wars Galaxies**

Launched in June 2003, Star Wars Galaxies tapped into a global market that had a passion for the George Lucas-created myth of Star Wars. Well before the game had been released outside the U.S. people throughout Europe and Southeast Asia and Oceania had obtained copies and had joined the community. Although so-called “European” servers were created after the European version release, gamers on many servers could be seen speaking in Portuguese, French, Dutch, and German well in advance of the European servers coming online. In addition, many players with “accents” were documented in game by us as well. With a community of such base diversity, we thought it ripe to explore its potential role as a public diplomacy tool.

### *User Experience*

The original intent of the Star Wars Galaxies MMO as envisioned by Raph Koster was to facilitate community and social interaction in a way that allowed users to create the content without the game imposing too much structure on them. This was controversial to some who preferred a more structured environment with quests. In many ways it seemed a generous ode to the different needs and styles of play that compel people to virtual worlds, as documented by Richard Bartle in his “Bartle Quotient.”

A rich interdependent economy was constructed with non-combat class crafters – from chefs to droid engineers – interacting, producing and selling necessary items with social classes like dancers and musicians, with the requisite combat classes. In later months cities were introduced with complex management structures that required a minimum number of residents in order to exist as well as other, arguably, tedious city and citizen management responsibilities. In short, Galaxies offered a complex, virtual environment rich with diverse social opportunities for people from diverse cultures and backgrounds to interact.

### *User Interaction*

From launch in June 2003 December 2004 – first year of Galaxies we observed numerous free-form socializing on so-called real world subjects (that is discussion that did not have relevance to the game world). Discussion in and out of public and guild chats easily occurred between people from different countries with discussion on or about those countries. Passion for the game was such that many people spent significant real world time “living” in the game. This allowed for substantive and rich opportunities for exchange.



The game's high capacity for 'non-combat' interaction meant that people might spend hours together in a purely social environment. Examples where of lengthy social interactions occurred and were observed included: in and around marketplaces; awaiting transportation (shuttleports); city gatherings; commerce and sales bazaars; city halls and related administrative and managerial gatherings.

#### *Informal Gatherings – the role of Flesh-Meet*

Given the far-flung residences of many MMO players, real-life meetings (or "flesh-meets" to borrow from SMS culture) are rare. Fortunately, we were able to gather data and observe real-time 'flesh-meets' at the 2004 Star Wars Galaxies Fan Fest. Attendance, according to official Lucas Arts representatives, was approximately 2,000 people. Of those, over 100 came from outside the United States. Our sample included visitors from France, England, Germany and Australia. Being able to engage and interview players in this "real life" environment was critical.

We conducted interviews with the non-U.S. attendees to address their motivations and involvement in the game. Primary questions focused on why they attended the conference, which was for only two days and for most involved a travel time of more than 15 hours. The primary response was to "be with the friends they had met" in game. Most, if not all, had developed such a strong sense of community with their fellow players that that did not want to miss out on being part of an "event" surrounding the community.

Secondary line of questioning explored the quality of relationships built ingame and perceptions of people from different cultures who were met ingame. With almost universal agreement people felt that relationships and feelings about people met in game transcended potential cultural biases and focused instead on the quality of the person met. People fully expected and hoped to continue with the friendships.

#### *Observations*

Relationships borne of the game environment seamlessly transferred into the physical world. Friendships that were formed ingame were easily embraced in the real world. People who had never before met in the physical world eagerly and enthusiastically engaged fellow players as though they were old friends. Conversations came easily. Conversely, people who disliked each other ingame carried those feelings into the non-virtual world.

### *Assumptions*

The diversity of complexity of social options in the game allowed for people to make assumptions about each other in the real world. Relationships were substantiated by mediated-discussion on game-related bulletin boards, guild web sites, and out-of-game chat.

### **Conclusion**

#### *Applications for Public Diplomacy*

Early research has confirmed that within these spaces, there is a unique opportunity to create, foster and sustain intercultural dialogue and that perception of national values, ideals, and character are both reinforced and altered by the real time interactions that occur in these spaces. Virtual Worlds provide opportunities for people to gather and build assumptions about their fellow players. Worlds that allow rich context and options for social interaction to occur (such as our case study) can facilitate bonds that transfer easily outside the game environment.

In a world in which technology changes, enhances and modifies the way generations of people interact, it behooves the public diplomacy foreign policy establishment to keep current.

According to our data, at least one way to facilitate dialogue and build relationships between cultures and people is through games.

Should games be distributed by foreign service officers in the field? Possibly. Should public diplomacy games be built by the governments? Probably not. Likely costs would be prohibitive. We recommend and have engaged various parties from these communities to consider the role these type of games might play in facilitating their work. It is perhaps a noble effort that might give different or added meaning to the gaming development and design world.