

**CYBER-WORLDS:**  
**(DIS)SIMULATION AND POWER IN**  
**CYBERSPACE**

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## **Introduction**

In attempting to define the scope of my research, this statement will draw a boundary around aims and intentions within the potentially infinite realm of cyber meta-space. The key issues this enquiry seeks to address, are how notions of simulation and power are relevant to aspects of cyberspace, and can be applied to virtual worlds in particular. I'm specifically interested in how to inhabit these particular virtual spaces requires a visual representation of a users presence, and how this can influence the theory of simulation and power. I believe these to be significant issues for this inquiry as any given society is becoming increasingly defined through its technology. That is to say that the realm of technology is expanding into social dimensions, and as we approach the millennium biology and technology are moving closer together.

It has proved necessary to broadly define two sections here in order to maintain an obvious sense of direction and purpose throughout this thesis. I now intend to give an explicit account of the agenda for this research.

The first section will begin with a chapter explicitly addressing virtual culture, mobilising many of the concepts discussed by Steven G. Jones (1997). This will provide an agenda for the rest of the section where I intend to sketch general features of cyberspace that present a notion of virtuality, exploring questions about the general phenomena. The discussion of virtual ideology within this chapter will be significant to the whole thesis, as this underpins the virtual world interactions I analyse in Section Two.

The broad theoretical terms within which I intend to conceptualise the inquiry will occupy Section One. McLuhan's prophesising of electronic man, Baudrillard's postmodern notion of simulation, and Foucault's theory of power will be discussed here respectively. When I refer to simulation and power throughout this thesis I will mean in the Baudrillardian and Foucauldian sense, unless specifically stated as otherwise.

McLuhan will be looked at first as his theories, although drawing inspiration from other sources, were the precursor to a lot of Baudrillard's work. The theory of 'implosion' is one example of this, which McLuhan first used to refer to the effects of information moving at the speed of light. However, Baudrillard inflects this within his own discourse to posit a disappearance of the 'real', as the boundary between representation and reality 'implodes'.

The discussion also deals with some of the inherent problematics of Baudrillardian discourse. These problematics are relevant to this investigation as they clearly demonstrate the pitfalls involved in an application of this nature. Whether or not they are the general problematics of postmodernism (does it really exist?) is not my concern here. What I am concerned with is the two way process between cyberspace phenomena, such as virtual worlds, and the nature of theory. For this reason I delve into Foucauldian discourse in chapter four, as his theory of power as constituted through discourse is highly relevant to my inquiry. The 'bottom-upwards' analysis of power that Foucault provides perfectly fits the physical structure of cyberspace, with every node on the network being potentially as central as the next. I also explore other relevant notions from

Foucault in this chapter. This is partly to demonstrate how the notion of 'bio-power' could be applied to cybersociety, with normality as a key strategy of power, and partly to help understand the nature of power and how it is constituted.

These theories form the basis for my interrogation, and I will assess their suitability for application in cyberspace through the mechanism of a two way dialectic between theory and object. In the second section I will focus on a specific aspect of cyber meta-space, namely graphical virtual worlds. These software driven worlds take the form of entirely self-contained social spaces, offering a form of diegetic realism to their inhabitants. My intention here is to describe the environment in terms of human ecology, then use ethnographic data as the object of theory to illuminate this area. The anticipated outcomes of this agenda will be an exemplification of the bi-directional nature of the relationship between theory and object, and a call for further research having illustrated the need for theoretical inquiry.

Accepting the limitations of this paper, it must be said that my aim is not to get deeply involved with postmodern theory, (although in discussing Baudrillard this could be likened to discussing tropical fish disease without mention of water conditions). Nor is it my intention to conduct a strict sociological inquiry into virtual interactions. I do however intend to analyse elements of cyberspace in terms of media and power theory acting upon social technology. Simulation and power are the theoretical meta-tools I will use in this thesis, arguing that they form a basis for the interpretation of cyberspace worlds.

Calls for further research will be made throughout this thesis, indicating the intensely problematic nature of defining a boundary within cyberspace, attempting to do justice to this thesis within the word limit. A collected list of these pointers will be given for convenience at the very end of this thesis.