

Section Two:

Avatar Worlds

In this 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 an alternative reality to their inhabitants.

The audio-visual bodies inhabited to allow communication within graphical virtual worlds are commonly known as ‘avatars’. The word ‘avatar’ itself stems from Hinduism, which is one of the oldest religious systems in the world today. Meaning: body that is inhabited by a God (or soul) to facilitate interaction in our world, it is perhaps no coincidence that this word has found its place into popular cyber-culture, for we are now inhabiting cyberspace worlds. Inhabiting an avatar is an integral part of participating in these virtual worlds. It is a virtual presentation of the self that gives other users a sense of “real” communication, as they can see whom they are interacting with.

“Avatars give people the illusion of high-bandwidth contact”

(<http://www.wired.com/news/news/culture/story/7951.html>, 2).

The fundamental defining aspect of avatar worlds is that three-dimensional graphics create the illusion of belonging within the scene, allowing the user to navigate freely through the environment (in the form of an avatar). The experience might equally be

termed 'non-immersive virtual reality', as the world has a boundary of a monitor screen.

While obviously providing simulated reality for subjects outside of 'normal' power relationships, participants form their own power relations in a simulated environment.

As specific instances of community, I intend to examine avatar worlds as a form of media text, using the theoretical focus already established.

Four Case Studies of Avatar Worlds

Paying close attention to the way in which interaction is structured and facilitated by the relevant technological capabilities, this section aims to be an exposition of social technology. That is to say, avatar worlds are a unique technological construct that has an explicitly social nature. By means of an example I will give a brief description of each followed by appropriate critical reflection, focusing on four major factors as criteria for interrogation.

The theoretical agenda for this analysis will utilise the notions already established in the first section of this thesis. In demonstrating how existing theoretical notions of simulation and power may be applied to cyberspace worlds, I intend to illustrate the need for further research. The two way process of understanding between theory and object will be most relevant here. As the object of theoretical focus, avatar worlds demand a rigorous inquiry, as their potential as a context to help us understand theory is unique. However it may be useful to briefly consider a Foucauldian position here, which rejects 'absolute' theory. As social spaces, avatar worlds are facilitators of discourse, and as discourses constitute their own truths, 'truth' itself is always variable. For this reason the analysis proposed here is slightly problematic, and we must be aware of this before we begin.

A) How is communication facilitated?

Communication in *Talkworld* takes place either by text, voice or text/voice mail. Text data packets travel faster than voice, so in order to minimise time delay this is a good option. However voice on the other hand, gives additional meaning to communication, as intonation can be included. The mail system allows private communication between users, as does the **whisper <player>* command. Social prestige is given to users with the technological ability to send speech, though this isn't always the preferred medium. With a microphone it is possible to have real time conversations with people who control other avatars in the world, or leave messages for people on the various bulletin boards by clicking on the red book icon from the toolbar (see Appendix A).

Communication in *Active Worlds* is by text only. This makes it easier to hide behind the façade of an avatar, giving total choice of gender and character formation to the user.

Onlive Traveller by contrast, only allows speech to be used as a form of communication. This creates a totally different environment from *Active Worlds*, as it is not possible to hide behind an avatar (it demands a user input his/her actual voice). In contrast again, *Worldsaway* facilitates purely text-based communication. However there is a complexity to this, as users may insert symbols (from a pop up menu) to indicate their present emotion.

A relevant line of inquiry here, though obviously problematic, would be Baudrillard's notion of Simulacra. It will aid my discussion to temporarily adopt a Baudrillardian stance here. In pointing out the problematic status of simulation, communication is

decontextualised. That is to say, once it becomes simulated communication no longer has a referent in reality.

“Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1988, 166).

If we take avatar world programs as reality simulations then the theoretical agenda begins to take on definition. Communication within a hyperreal context becomes simulated communication, which loses its grounding in reality. But where does the simulation begin and reality end? (Bearing in mind that an existing structure of telephone wires forms the physical network.) The simulated reality Baudrillard speaks of is all around us, being somehow more real than reality. This must be taken into account when attempting to apply his work to avatar worlds as reality simulations, as one actually needs to sit down in front of a monitor to enter the diegetic world. Thus these cannot be taken as true reality simulations; they merely offer an alternative social space.

It is important to remember that we cannot take Baudrillard's position on reality simulations as authoritative here, as we have already witnessed the problematic status of self-negation inherent in hyperreality. Rejection of Baudrillard's theory is useful to this discussion however, as it frames my argument within the context of a postmodern agenda whilst providing an example of failed application. This is important as it can be

contrasted with successful application to aid the theory/practice dialectic. The process of attempting the application in itself is useful to illuminate the latter relationship.

The means by which communication is facilitated appears to make little difference to actual content as, without a mechanism for regulating social structure the conversation remains relatively shallow. Users of avatar worlds tend to either form bonds through a common interest in technology (I struck up a lasting friendship with an avatar named ‘Videofeedback’ after he showed me how to adjust virtual memory settings), or chat about media events such as the ‘Clinton affair’.

B) How are the avatars constructed?

The desire to be unique appears to be one of the greatest factors affecting avatar construction (<http://www.wired.com/news/news/culture/story/7951.html>, 2). The physical construction of *Talkworld* avatars is through a character composition window: a kind of mix and match with four sections: head, torso, legs and feet. The character editor, whilst containing multi racial features (such as an “afro” hairstyle), is predominantly stereotypical about binary gender distinctions in that you are forced to be male or female. The psychological construction of Talkworld avatars (user/avatar realism) tends to hold true to real life without too much blatant manipulation by users. However behavioural extremes are often explored. This is detailed later.

In *Active worlds* avatars are simply selected from a list. However *Worldsaway* avatars are linked to the virtual political economy that underpins their society. You can start with a basic standard avatar, which can be either male or female. The user may then purchase alternative bodies, heads, clothing etc. This even extends to buying spray cans from vending machines to allow users to customise their own avatars (see Appendix D). This complex system seems to work best as it allows a greater degree of both creativity and individuality, giving rise to ‘elite’ users who have the coolest avatars.

Baudrillard’s contention that Disneyland is the real America is useful here to draw a comparison between physical and virtual simulation. As Disneyland was put there to convince the world that the rest of the United States are real, it could be said that these avatar worlds are ‘put’ there to convince us that cyberspace is real. In fact both America and cyberspace are lost in the realm of hyperreality (according to Baudrillard). I intend to sidestep the problematic status of hyperreality for the sake of thematic continuity here, as even if the notion is flawed it will aid my discussion to draw this comparison. Disneyland is extremely like *Worldsaway* in that it presents a fictitious social microcosm that offers an alternative reality to everyday life:

“Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with it is a play of illusions and phantasms: pirates, the frontier, future world, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the operation successful. But, what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturised and

religious reveling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks” (Baudrillard, 1988, 171).

With its many colorful avatars Baudrillard could equally be talking about *Worldsaway* here. The only difference being that *Worldsaway* does not pose a real threat to our reality, as in order to access cyberspace one must sit in front of a monitor and keyboard; so the user is made blatantly aware of the simulation. However, there is a great similarity between an actor wearing a life size Mickey Mouse costume and an avatar, as both are a skin (to borrow from McLuhanism) that is put on and masks real identity while allowing interaction with others. I have discussed primarily visual construction of avatars here.

The psychological implications of interaction through avatars appear to be that the individual is less inhibited than in real life, as a safety distance between user and situation is created. Whilst I recognise that this is both interesting and relevant I cannot pursue it any further here.

The avatars in *Traveller* are mainly three dimension heads that are chosen at the start and may not be customised (see Appendix C), though users may also choose unusual avatars such as a three dimensional pair of lips or a parrot. However the question of content behind avatar interaction has been raised in relation to this world.

“...brilliantly executed online worlds such as Onlive here you have some of the most breathtaking avatars, beautifully drawn, actual lip-synching and sound to create a realistic

environment, fun, community-based, but the people popping in and out of these spaces have nothing to say” (<http://www.nbma.com/cat/rituals/rituals.html>, 9).

The hollow nature of interaction here can be taken as the largest problem facing online worlds: how to define a community agenda through the implementation of social frameworks. I will address this point in a later subchapter.

C) What the relationship to ‘space’ is?

One nice feature of *Talkworld* is the compass indicating which direction you are facing in, combating the effects of implosion by providing a mechanism of balance that is discussed later on. Users may move about inside of or between buildings using the doors (which make intriguing sound effects). There is a map of the various buildings with adjoining courtyards, woods and gardens that separate them. However, apart from ‘walking’ there is also a ‘teleport’ feature that simply allows you to select a user or location to teleport to.

The teleport feature in *Active Worlds* requires specific coordinates. This works quite well as there are always new developments springing up “out of town” so to speak, which would require a great deal of walking from the default entry point (see Appendix B). The teleport feature will only transport users within a particular world however; in order to “emigrate” to another of the 163 worlds (at the time of writing) the user would simply

double click on the name of that world in the left-hand column. Through using the + and - keys it is also possible to float up in the air and look either up or down.

Onlive Traveller seems to hold a similar disregard for the notion of gravity. It is possible to point oneself in any direction using the 'rotate' and 'flip' keys, and then it is simply a matter of moving either forwards or backwards. You may also look up or down without changing the actual 'position' of your inworld avatar. There are also portals which you may 'travel' to other world destinations through. These take the form of mounted rotating shapes. If someone doesn't like you it is easy for him or her to disappear into another world merely by flying into one of these.

Locomotion in *Worldsaway* is purely on a basis of choosing which direction to walk in by clicking the mouse on a menu. Once inside a 'room' it is possible to mouse click a position on the floor you wish to move to. Each screen presents itself individually rather than scrolling, which creates a textual chat room effect for social interaction. It is commonplace to find 20 avatars all crammed into the same room. While I was a beta tester for this world there would be social gatherings and parties in users private rooms which only invited guests could attend. The events bring the whole community together and form a type of 'social scaffolding'. The fact that a lot of 'ghost towns' exist where a beautifully drawn three dimension world can't attract visitors with anything more to say than casual chat is testimony to this.

The relationship to 'space' also involves users creating their own environment. *Active Worlds* allows users to build by right clicking the mouse to cause a menu to appear with a screen object highlighted. The properties for this object may then be changed (along with its name) so that anything can in-fact be anything else. Once the properties have been changed the object may be placed anywhere repeatedly (the walls of a house for instance). However the "builder" must have property rights to the area to be allowed to build, which you must be a registered user for. Just as we build virtual boundaries and homes in cyberspace, the institutions governing legal rights assume the role of town council. Johnson & Post (Kahin & Nesson (ed.), 1997, Chapter 1) have stated that electronic communications show a total disregard to geographical boundaries. As the cost of using the net is distance and often time insensitive (Kahin & Nesson (ed.), 1997, viii), it represents a new boundary that defines cyberspace as essentially outside of territorial law. In a world of geographic borders separating legal rights, it is difficult if not impossible to make the transition to governing cyberspace as a global community, and perhaps futile too as each Avatar world has its own regulatory mechanisms.

McLuhan's technologically optimistic discourse is useful here to discuss electronic media and human systems through the notion that space may be perceived differently according to a visual or acoustic preference. As these notions have been described earlier I will not attempt to redefine them here; other than to say that while closing our eyes may disconnect vision, we are in constant contact with the acoustic world. This may be likened to a webserver dishing out pages to a global reception (of different time zones) twenty-four hours a day. Technologies such as 'Real Audio' are capable of packaging a

radio broadcast into a file which is available in the same fashion. This provides a clue as to the model of acoustic cyberspace that I will now develop.

In his discussion of acoustic space, Paul Levinson (1999, 44-54) finds radio and television to be 'closed' acoustic spaces, as unlike the Internet they do not readily facilitate two way interaction without involving a second party medium such as the telephone or post office. As a starting point he takes McLuhan's premise that the phonetic alphabet shapes our perception through linear, sequential conditioning. Thus making visual space a technological artefact.

"... what we take for granted in the shapes and organisation of our external visual world is actually a consequence of the technological lenses through which many of us for the past 2,500 years of Western history have been inclined to regard the world – specifically, the prism of the linear, connected alphabet" (1999, 45).

Having explained the significance of the alphabet's conditioning as primarily visual, he goes on to develop McLuhan's notion of pre-literate acoustic space applied to cyberspace. Levinson posits that a truly futuristic cyberspace may contain no written alphabet, being comprised entirely of speech. This would place *Onlive Traveller* as being acoustic on more levels than say *Worldsaway*, as the alphabet is not used in a way that requires visual perception. However this outlines one of the fundamental problematics in Levinson's analysis, the fact that distinction between reading the phonetic alphabet and hearing it is unclear. This should not be so when it is vital to the model he builds, as the

former is taken as visual while the latter constitutes acoustic. He does however note a central problematic in McLuhan's discourse (48-9), which is that mass-produced texts are lumped together with handwritten manuscripts as alphabetic-visual culture. Thus, the electronic-acoustic properties of print are not discussed.

If alphabetic cyberspace is to be taken as acoustic, and text worlds fit this category best, then avatar worlds remain figuratively acoustic, although not literally as visual perception is required to receive them. The difference being that literally acoustic involves the ear in perception, while figuratively acoustic may rely on the eye for perception, as is the case with television, while displaying the same information to the entire viewing public, (which is becoming global with the advent of satellite). As McLuhan passed away before the advent of avatar worlds this is my interpretation of how the notion of acoustic space might be applied. Although perceiving a monitor screen involves visual perception, I agree with Levinson that the acoustic metaphor best fits cyberspace as a whole. However, as avatar worlds have finite boundaries I do not think they can be lumped together with cyberspace, although both of the latter are figuratively acoustic. As media define society I believe that as acoustic man devours information he would implode were it not for the balance mechanisms provided by virtual worlds. To qualify this statement it may be necessary to recap on McLuhan's use of the word 'implosion':

"...by which McLuhan meant the "pulling out of the spaces {and time} between components"" (Genosko, 1990, 94).

In McLuhan's discourse these technological images and events are mediated through extensions of the body that increase power and speed, though this is seen as disruptive. Thus differing speeds of movement between media images and events is conflictual as friction is created with no space to act as a cushion. However, as homogenous speeds entail balance according to Genosko (1990, 97), the homogenous speed of an avatar world with a structured setting as the environment in which events take place must also constitute a balance mechanism.

D) How relevant is the concept of a virtual economy to maintaining diegetic functionality?

Of the 4 worlds the concept of a virtual economy is only employed in *Worldsaway* (which incidentally is the hardest to gain access to: requiring a CompuServe account, MasterCard or Visa at the time of writing). The token system in *Worldsaway* is highly effective as everything 'in world' relies on virtual money. It works by allowing all users to pick up 750 credits from the hotel reception at the very start of the simulation. These have to be withdrawn from an ATM machine before they can be 'spent'. It is possible to buy objects from vending machines with "tokens in hand," as well as users buying and selling amongst themselves. These objects may then be placed anywhere. This constitutes changing the environment for other users, as objects have a 'persistent' quality and remain regardless of whether anyone is there to see them or not.

Worldsaway employs the notion of a ‘turf’, which the user rents with tokens to become his/her permanent virtual home that they dictate who else has access to. The owner is therefore capable of inviting guests’ back, and similarly throwing them out if they incur displeasure. Allowing users to build and ‘own’ property, then hold ritual parties for guests in a social space that belongs exclusively to them is a good form of social cohesion.

The credits in the bank go up with the amount of time spent in the world. As entry into this exclusive community involves an economics of access, this economy is not entirely virtual. There are three payment schemes consisting of: Bronze - \$4.95 per month for five hours in the world and then \$2.95 per additional hour, Silver, and Gold - \$17 per month and unlimited hours. Consequently the elite users have to spend a large proportion of real time inside the world to maintain their status. The economy underpins *Worldsaway* society as social prestige is won by ‘being cool’ (which you need tokens for). The virtual economy employed in *Worldsaway* enforces certain reality principles that enliven the social space, not least because it is potentially a meeting ground of different cultures; although in reality most users of *Worldsaway* are American. West and East Coast users have been known to alter their usage times to be online together as very close friendships are formed easily in this particular world.

Many of these world simulations begin to develop a virtual political economy when a hierarchical structure of users begins to emerge. In this case the elite users would be the ones running the system, or the ones with most knowledge of the avatar world. Foucault’s

notion of decentralised power is useful here, as it accounts for individuals having the means to form alternative power hierarchies within cyberspace. As power exists in discourse at the micro level of society, it is through discursive practises that these hierarchies are formed. In Foucauldian discourse freedom is a critical component of power, as without the object of power having the ability to resist, power cannot create an effect.

The fact that all users begin the simulation with the same resources suggests a rudimentary form of socialism. This is the case in *Worldsaway*, though an accurate metaphor for the way social structure is organised around the economy in this simulation would lean towards capitalism. Users 'buy' objects to decorate their 'turf' with tokens gained through spending time 'in world'. Elite users/avatars through their own capitalistic tendencies thus become agents of normalisation in some respects, as they are the pillars of the community by which other users gauge their own social success. In Foucauldian discourse it is through the establishment of normality that the notion of bio-power arises.

As Foucault saw identity as culturally constructed, the conception of a virtual subject is constituted as a central concern of the information age. This would involve locating the avatar persona/body as a site for the operations of power. However I do not know if Foucault can be unproblematically applied in this context, as this particular exposition assumes similarity between avatars and bodies, which need to be fundamentally different to manifest in electronic and physical environments. The purpose of it here however, is to show that application of power theory, although problematic in the respect that Foucault

did not believe in providing 'absolute' theory, raises unique possibilities for future research. All I can clearly state is, worlds that employ the notion of an economy have deeper social structures, as social cohesion is promoted through having 'common' goals.

In this subchapter I have attempted to apply the theory of simulation and power to four examples of avatar worlds in such a way as to leave pointers for further research, whilst giving the reader a fuller characterisation of the nature of avatar worlds. Whilst I recognise that this is highly pertinent, I have been unable to explore and develop my ideas fully here. What I have been able to do however, is document initial ideas that contribute to this thesis by illustrating theory with practice. However, in the case of Baudrillard this only highlights the inherent contradictions of hyperreality, as the attempted application of his theory fails due to self-negation. I now intend to discuss the methodology considered in my investigation of these worlds.

Methodology of Avatar Investigation

The basic research approach to date has been that of theoretical inquiry along the lines of the dialectic outlined in the introduction. This was that the phenomena of cyberspace/avatar worlds make the theory of simulation and power intelligible through its own application and vice versa. In order to analyse, interpret and evaluate data and experiences in the avatar worlds, it seems appropriate to conceptualise this aspect of the inquiry in terms drawn from holistic ethnography. However, this investigation does not claim to be an accurate exercise in ethnography, rather it is an account of avatar worlds informed by key ideas and perspectives drawn from the methodology. Thus I acknowledge the limitations of this investigation as not being an inquiry developed upon social science in the strictest sense. Instead of this, it aims to be an account and interpretation of avatar worlds, which utilise ideas and approaches to data drawn from holistic ethnography. Thus, the methodology discussed here has been applied to technological society as described above.

My intention here is to briefly discuss the merits of the ethnographic methodology in the context of this thesis. An exploration of ethnographic fieldwork through a particular narrative mode will illuminate the theories already established in this paper whilst aiding the theory/practice dialectic. For example, Gibson's logic of mutuality (Gibson, J. 1982, 237: cited in <http://www.trincoll.edu/~psyc/UK95abs.html>, 3) could equally be applied as an ethnographic principle: neither organisms nor environments can be defined outside of

their own relationship. However the principle of mutuality encounters a paradox in its very nature:

“The organism depends upon its environment for its life, but the environment does not depend on the organism for its existence” (Gibson, 1979, 129: cited in Ibid).

When action is introduced between environment and organism, the human psyche becomes the object of theoretical focus, acting as a catalyst between environment and subject. This is partly why I have used ethnography as it provides an appropriate way to conceptualise and understand the data. That is to say, the data is first described, then analysed in a way that illuminates the relationship with theory.

As the environment affects both social and individual internal interaction it is important to incorporate the notion of myself as perceiver within that environment, who acknowledges the role of interaction. One of the main tasks in studying this is to identify the information people use to organise their interaction. Perception is important here, as it ultimately affects social participants whilst interacting, and also shapes the attitudes of participants. The way in which an individual perceives the world around him/her self governs their response to it. For instance, an individual may be perceive a situation as hostile where other participants may be at ease, or enjoying pernicious wordplay with no malicious intent. Examples of this will be given in the following analysis and interpretation of avatar worlds.

Ethnography is no different from any other form of social research in many respects as it employs participant observation to elicit cultural knowledge through holistic analysis. However, if the researcher is not careful he may shape the surrounding environment, affecting the behaviour and attitudes of subjects thus contaminating data. This taken into account, ethnographic study is perhaps most successful where the researcher becomes a full participant, hiding the purpose of interaction from others. This method has an extra dimension over 'fly on the wall' observation, as the researcher may carefully structure interaction to reveal a particular area of interest.

“By including our own role within the research focus, and perhaps even systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social world and justify them without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, 21-2).

One of the main reasons for privileging this approach is the commitment to discovery, emphasized through the importance of field notes as descriptions of social processes and contexts. Thus, ideas from ethnography have proved the most appropriate and interesting for the following account of experiences in avatar worlds, which constitute data in this context.

In my discussion of the ethno-methodology I have illustrated that although not based in social science as such, this investigation has been informed by perspectives from the

above. This thesis now moves onto a discussion of *Talkworld*, intended to characterise the 'avatar world' as social technology.

Talkworld

Operational since mid January '97 in beta (test) version, '*Networld*' has now finished being modified, undergone a name change to '*Talkworld*,' and was available for download from:

<http://www.etchinghill.com>

(This resource was accessed in 1999 and may not be available today.)

In order to illustrate how my perceptions of social technology were formed within the narrative framework, I will give a description of the world here.

The buildings that may be inhabited are all firmly rooted in notions of community (see Figure One).

Science Center
Tavern
Museum Town Hall Church
Cinema
Sports Centre

Figure One: Buildings in *Talkworld*.

These institutions provide a model of humanity, as it is currently understood in the Western world. Whilst some of these institutions involve civic responsibility they all

embody the different aspects of life providing a suitable model of humanity. What does it mean then to replicate these spaces in cyberspace? Perhaps the answer lies in establishing a model of the basic human needs for emotional, psychological and physical well being. This includes the way in which we come to understand ourselves historically through the replication of a museum. The way we deal with the future through faith, as religion is a basic human need, through the replication of a church. The way we entertain ourselves socially through the replication of a tavern. The way we entertain ourselves through reproducing social experience with film. The way we come to understand the world scientifically. The way we need to exercise to remain healthy.

The model of humanity provided by these key institutions' attempts to simulate social existence. The theorization's I applied to these spaces were speculative at best and potentially contentious at worst. They have been excluded from the final thesis, as my intention was merely to draw attention to the potential of theory for application to avatar world contexts, illustrating both how and why such contexts could benefit from theory and vice versa. However it became apparent that this characterisation of different arena for interaction within *Talkworld* was a deviation from my initial project, which has now been abbreviated thus. The only way to shed any real conceptual light on the subject is to look at the participants and users of this world. The ethno methodology used here would infer that the apparent lack of any real social structure leaves typical interaction on a 'chat' level, rather than creating a socially dynamic community. That is to say, whilst the technology liberates certain experiences from real world constraints, the nature of interaction in an avatar world may be deemed lacking or 'hollow,' in respect of the non

verbal cues often taken for granted in face to face communication. This technological removal or distance from humanity challenges the integrity of avatar world interaction as social experience. In his most recent work, Levinson speculates on the future of communications (1999, 52), positing that media evolve in a Darwinian sense with humanity playing the dual role of inventor and selector. He further notes that selection is made on the basis of two criteria.

“...(a) we want media to extend our communications beyond the biological boundaries of naked seeing and hearing (this only restates McLuhan’s view of media as “extensions” across time and space...)...; (b) we want media to recapture elements of that biological communication which early artificial extensions may have lost – we want, in other words, our hearth of natural communication even as we exceed it in our extensions” (Ibid.).

By “extensions” the author is using McLuhan’s own term, meaning ‘media’ as the extension of man. The criteria have two things to say about avatar worlds. Firstly they go part way toward explaining their increasing popularity, as humanity is constantly attempting to “recapture elements of biological communication.” The avatar world is a significant leap forward from the telephone in this respect, as participants now have a virtual presence in the form of a body, and an environment in which to act. Secondly, the criteria suggest future developments will bring technology and humanity closer together. Thus while avatar reality is commonly seen as deficient, as it lacks crucial elements of humanity, this may not always be true. The two-way theory/practice dialectic that was the initial focus of this investigation is perhaps most evident here, as Levinson’s position and

use of McLuhan makes the phenomena of avatar worlds intelligible as an extension of humanity. This in return illuminates his discourse with a context that shapes our perception of his ideas.

Another example of the theory/practice dialectic can be found in noting the common ground shared by McLuhan and Foucault: power. McLuhan posits that as technological extensions of the body, media ultimately increase power and speed. Thus power structures are decentralised by electronic speeds of information implosion. This complements the Foucauldian logic of power having centres everywhere and flowing from micro to macro level. At the micro level of individual discourse, the power/knowledge relationship may create a perceived truth that is always a variable. The perfect exemplification of Foucault's theory of power, that it exists within the everyday discourse of networked relationships, can be found in cyberspace, as individual power is enhanced to the extent that McLuhan's doctrine of media extensions to the body attains a global reach.

My first experience of being fully immersed in Talkworld with a microphone headset involved a character named Tom, who had chosen a tattooed skinhead avatar with boots and braces. After declaring that he was going to kill everyone, and displaying an alarming show of aggressive masculinity, (involving running through my avatar and calling me names), Tom apologised. I later learned that he was a seventeen year old American male adolescent. My interpretation of his behaviour is that he was using technology to extend the physical limitations of his reality, by replicating what he perceived to be traditional

representations of masculinity. According to “Wired,” the correct term for this is “SNERT”.

“An obnoxious person (often a teenage boy) who offends or harasses other members or guests of an on-line chat room. SNERT allegedly stands for Sexually Nerdish Expressively Recidivistic Troll” (Wired, 5.04, 68).

“Snert-ing” is widespread because cyberspace operates with different power relationships to reality. One needn’t necessarily suffer any consequences for one’s actions in cyberspace as anonymity dictates. However being harassed in a virtual world is equally as distressing as being harassed in reality. While there are real worries about violence and pornography, cyberspace transactions recognise the need for an ethical problematic. However I’m not concerned with discussing them in any depth here as they are ultimately part of a larger issue: that of censorship which is arguably the most uncontrollable aspect of the Internet.

Through detailing the *Talkworld* environment, this subsection has attempted to define avatar worlds within the broader category of social technology. The use of McLuhan’s ‘extensions of man’ theory is an attempt to explain how media are subject to social selection, and ultimately move closer towards humanity itself. Thus the avatar world is exemplified as social technology.

The discussion now moves directly into interpreting some of the most pertinent ethnographic data, obtained indirectly through the Internet medium by utilising the mechanism of a web-page form. It is useful here to briefly consider a Foucauldian stance here, which takes identity as presented rather than possessed. Given Foucault's dislike of absolutes, identity can be seen as something one presents to the external world depending on the situation and environment. This notion of identity as fluid rather than fixed is particularly helpful in considering the implications made in the next subchapter.