

## **Ethnographic Data**

Let me reiterate the fact that this is not an enquiry based strictly upon sociology. My intent here is merely to reveal an insight into avatar usage as an appliance of social interface technology. That is to say, an immersive effect that places the participant inside the world is created through moving three-dimensional graphics. The quality of this interface with technology is a key factor in discussing a social formation existing in cyberspace, as it ultimately governs the nature of interaction. Levinson's contention that media evolve in a Darwinian sense (1999, 52) explains here how the interface between biological and technological systems is being designed according to social forces of selection. The ultimate goal of these social forces is to make technology more like humanity, a kind of 'bio persuasion'.

Along with an initial essay stating the objectives, a research form was placed on my Internet site, which would send data to me by email in an attempt to uncover a truly ethnographic perspective. Although in operation for over twelve months the resulting data was rather disappointing to say the least as there were only eight genuine responses. Thus statistical analysis is of little point here, as with such a small sample there was not enough consistency among answers to warrant this. Therefore I have been selective in the topics for inclusion here, and although relatively brief, my treatment of these responses contributes to the ethnography by uncovering individual perspectives that illustrate the need for a theoretical position on simulation and power.

The first respondent I intend to look at here uses his avatar name to refer to himself in cyberspace. He considers the truest representation of his linguistic self to be an avatar consciously constructed to initiate a dynamic of interaction. This is done by using his middle name and birth year in his screen name, which gives a clue as to his real identity which is the point he wishes to begin interacting from.

“I am pretty comfortable with the notion that what I say necessarily represents myself. For example I don't agonize over presenting a coherent self-entity when I chat or that I might say something that will discredit me. I guess I do think about how others might perceive what I am saying and construct my 'avatar' within certain boundaries that I think will evoke a certain interactive dynamic. I often use my middle name and my birth year in my screen name so in that way I give my real age and sex which some people have voiced to me. In that I am able to represent myself so plastically in representing myself to others in the chat I guess I would have to say that it is the truest representation of my linguistic-self.”

Of the entire sample, Adam was the only respondent who gave a detailed insight into why he considered his avatar to be a true representation of himself. The only drawback to ‘coding’ his identity into middle name and birth year is that unless this convention is commonly understood it is meaningless. Free email addresses often include numbers to make a commonly used name unique depending on the number of instances in existence. By “linguistic self” he means himself as presented through the linguistic apparatus

available on the Internet. The limitations imposed by technology, which blot out certain senses, is part of constituting this definition of self. For example, it is impossible to 'smell' the person/s one is interacting with in cyberspace, and this is acknowledged through the prefix 'linguistic'.

When asked to describe a significant event that he had experienced in avatar worlds he provides an interesting perspective on 'Snert-ing'.

"A lot of my pleasure in chatting comes from what you call SNERTing. This is because I enjoy the humor of banter and word play and a chat room seems to be a nice setting to practice this since there aren't any material repercussions (unless you consider subjective realities material). In my ethics they aren't in the chat context because there people have the full capability to write off what they hear as coming from crazy people or whatever. The extent to which they give their own imaginations to what offends them determines the violence of these linguistic acts, not what is said. Needless to say the real pleasure in this 'flaming' is listening to the sanctions from others... Sometimes I play the role of finger-shaker as well though. A few days ago some Korean girl came into the college years chat wanting to talk about Kosovo. Then an American (sounding) guy told her to go to another room to talk about that, because he didn't see the college room as an appropriate forum for this (he wanted opinions on which college to go to). I decided to harass him then about wanting to avoid the Kosovo topic, and because he called her a 'fop', which he explained was someone whose English

wasn't very good. I guess the choices I made about who to harass and why would come closer to represent who I am than the means used to criticize.”

The interesting thing here is that Adam recognises that choices are involved in ‘Snert-ing,’ which also play a defining role in constituting his identity. The role of ‘finger-shaker’ in itself would suggest a high moral standing, providing evidence of cyber-autonomy, as the harasser will think twice before coming back after being reprimanded. Adam shows a very mature perspective in his position that linguistic violence is a variable governed by the extent to which participants “think” about what offends them. Thus he is saying that the more conscious a person is of being abused the more sensitive to it they will become, which is a fair opinion although I do not have room to test it here. The question pre-empting this: does one consider subjective realities material? To which Adam decides the answer is no, as the technological distance of electronics between participants provides space for considered interpretation, which allows easy dismissal. It may be useful to re-examine our motives for this analysis here, as the technological reconstruction of the human being, will inevitably effect subjective realities through electronics. Foucault’s notion of subjectivity as the position we inhabit within discourse is useful here, as it has been acknowledged earlier that ‘Snert-ing’ is made possible by the alternative power relationships evident in avatar worlds. At macro level, the subject is interpolated within the ideology that discourse serves. Thus in avatar worlds subjectivity is effected through the electronics that make discourse transactions possible, and then interpolated into the particular ideology that the discourse serves, although commonly

this is the dominant ideology. In this case I would argue that the Californian Ideology constitutes the dominant ideology.

In response to the question of using an opposite sex avatar, one respondent articulated:

“ I've used a female avatar on occasion and I was treated just like I really was female. The guy avatars made suggestive comments and the females treated me with more friendship and appeared more frank in their conversations and less on guard... People could be lured into unhealthy relationships: like a youngster thinking he was talking to someone his own age, and actually talking to an adult, or vice versa. Or people may pose as a different sex.”

This candidate notices that people may be lured into unhealthy relations while openly admitting to virtual gender swapping himself. Although supposedly common in cyberspace this was the only response offering insight into ‘why’ people like to experiment with different social roles in this fashion. ‘Bugsy’ notes here the difference in treatment one receives according to gender. He also makes the point that different behaviour to the opposite sex is often at sub conscious level.

It is important to remember however, that role-playing and simulation (in the common sense of the word as opposed to the Baudrillardian) did not start on the Internet.

Shakespeare’s “As You Like It,” uses gender swapping as a plot device for re-framing personal and political choices (Turkle, 1996, 214). Sherry Turkle (Ibid.) devotes a chapter to virtual cross-dressing and the sociological reasons for this. She cites a Japanese Multi

User Dimension (MUD) called Habitat as an example, where there is a ratio of 1 real life woman to 4 real life men, but only 3 male characters to each female one. After considering that the MUD has a total of 1.5 million users, this involves tens of thousands in online gender bending.

Turkle notes that virtual cross-dressing can be psychologically complicated in that the gender swapper may discover things about themselves that they did not know before. This experience opens up the chance to explore conflicts raised by biological gender, enabling people to experience what it feels like to be the opposite gender. In this way, virtual characters become tools for unraveling the social construction of gender, or even a vehicle for self-reflection (219). If we draw upon Foucault's notion of self-hermeneutics, avatars could be theorised as the very interface between hermeneutics and self.

Turkle also notes that certain gender roles from real life are replicated in cyberspace, in that offering technical assistance can become a way to purchase female attention. Similarly, expectations of gender encourage certain types of behaviour.

“For virtual reality to be interesting it has to emulate the real. But you have to be able to do something in the virtual that you couldn't in the real. For me, my female characters are interesting because I can say and do the sorts of things that I mentally want to do, but if I did them as a man, they would be obnoxious. I see a strong woman as admirable. I see a strong man as a problem. Potentially a bully” (Ibid., 219).

She notes the difference in perceptual coding here, as for Case (the object of her study) if you are assertive as a man it is coded as “being a bastard,” whereas if you are assertive as a woman it is coded as “modern and together.” This example also serves the argument that social values are replicated in cyberspace in just the same way as the institution of patriarchy.

In her analysis of text based worlds (Multi User Dimensions) Turkle calls for a new model of identity addressing a non-unitary self that enables previously repressed characteristics.

“The unitary self maintains its oneness by repressing all that does not fit. Thus censored, the illegitimate parts of the self are not accessible”

(<http://www.transparencynow.com/turkle.htm>, 2).

Her discourse is itself a proponent of the commonly accepted “interface value” notion that accepts avatar characters as what they claim to be. Thus, a kind of popular culture arises where virtual interactions, whether text or avatar based, compete with reality, blurring the distinction between self and simulation. Within this reality conception life itself increasingly becomes a symbolic arena for acting out fantasies, as so-called real life integrates itself with high tech simulations that offer alternative realities. The new simulation culture that seeks to bring reality and simulation together also attempts to give us equal control in both environments. With the philosophy that reality and simulation will be indistinguishable in the future, the society of simulation is creating a source of cultural legitimation that views the universe as fashioned after itself (Ibid.).

These extracts from ethnographic data have been included here to illustrate that real people are involved in populating avatar worlds. Also, where human society exists there is also ground for theoretical inquiry. This creates a mutually beneficial relationship between theory and practice that helps us to understand both the model of technological humanity and the theory itself. Avatar worlds are largely experimental at the time of writing. They have the potential to provide a model of humanity that may evolve with cyberspace to alter the dominance of textuality on the electronic landscape.

I will now conclude this thesis of simulation and power theory in relation to the dual focus of cyberspace (Section One), and avatar worlds (Section Two).

## **Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction, the initial aim of this project was to illuminate the relationship between theory and the dual focus of this thesis. The first level focus is cyberspace, which is dealt with in Section One. This discussion seeks to characterise and explore notions of cyberspace in terms of simulation and power. Within the wide-ranging focus of cyberspace, Section Two identifies a more specific concern. This is to specifically concentrate on avatar worlds as an example of communication within cyberspace, and particularise four examples. The purpose of this is to narrow down the focus in order to demonstrate a theoretical application of McLuhan, Baudrillard and Foucault. It has been important to establish this dual focus in the above order, as 'cyberspace' is a very general term and potentially infinite. In selecting avatar worlds as a specific phenomenon, I tried to choose a unique but peculiar form of communication that adds an extra dimension to IRC (Internet Relay Chat). Whilst attempting to contextualise electronic social space, the linked but distinct concerns of both sections ultimately serve the bi-directional theory/practice dialectic that I have developed throughout this thesis.

The principal rationale for attempting this research has been the increasing proliferation and technological capabilities of avatar worlds. I have illustrated the potential they offer to the world of computer networking in the future. One speculation that I may add here is that in the future it will be possible to walk into a virtual therapy clinic in the form of an avatar, and receive treatment accordingly. Virtual worlds will play an increasingly large

part in our day to day lives, as the naturalisation of technology is now an autonomous process. In order to conclude the net effect of simulation and power, I will now explain the purpose behind what has been covered in each section, and subsequently the conclusions we can draw from this.

The aim of chapter 1 was to provide a discussion of community that presented the notion in general terms, preparing the ground for a more detailed enquiry in the Foucault chapter. Rheingold's image of a global petri dish was presented here to invoke a relatively theoretical discussion on the 'nature' of social technology. The purpose of this was to introduce an exposition of the Californian Ideology, as evidenced in the popular journal "Wired." It would be useful to investigate the extent to which avatar world users buy into this ideology, as that could illuminate their perceived values to an extent. I will address this in the calls for future research section at the end of this conclusion.

Within the Californian Ideology exclusive discursive formations exist alongside more inclusive discourses. As one such exclusive formation, the discussion of the #gaysex IRC channel and treatment of Shaw's study is interesting, as with gay men being in a repressed position until they 'come out' to the world, technology affords the opportunity to "test the water". Instead of experimenting with fictitious personas, gay men experiment to find a real identity they are comfortable with. As technology is now accelerating into our homes, with the popular media increasingly incorporating references to it, this identity test may well become an established part of gay culture in the future.

In cyberspace, the same notions of law as the rest of cybersociety bind discursive formations. The notion of Law speculations are included here, as this is a central problematic to the future of cyberspace, which unless resolved could have serious repercussions. The general purpose for this chapter then, was to introduce cyberspace as the object of focus, and provide a context for the theoretical positions of Baudrillard, McLuhan and Foucault. I have contextualised the study in this way to give some ground for the theoretical positions of simulation and power. In setting this context I have taken key aspects that define the 'nature' of cyberspace, and discussed their relevance as elements of social technology. From this chapter we can provisionally conclude that the context of community in a virtual setting constitutes social technology through the implementation of ideological systems like the Californian Ideology.

In the context of this thesis McLuhan is useful to provide a human dimension to electronic networks, in the form of a conceptual model of interface as human consciousness extending into the electronic global web. His theory treats the electronic media as extensions of humanity. The notions of the global village and implosion are effective devices here to theorise media concentration. The global village is a kind of macro theory, relating to the compression of time and space through the use of technology, to the extent that less 'distance' exists in the world. The global village has been commonly adopted recently, as a phrase addressing the fact that global telecommunications have made the world seem smaller. Though the global village doesn't reveal any new insight as such in this context, from its use here we can conclude that social technology, as a form of global telecommunication, also concentrates time and

space, making intimate relationships possible between parties at opposing poles of the globe.

Implosion approaches the same concentration from a different theoretical position. By addressing the ‘pulling out of space between information and events,’ implosion is relevant here as it offers an interpretation of the environment of social technology in terms of the process through which it is constituted. Thus we can conclude that implosion is a key concept in the discussion of simulation and social technology. As this ground is shared between McLuhan and Baudrillard, I will now discuss Baudrillard’s contribution to this thesis.

It is important to understand Baudrillard’s theoretical position of hyperreality as self-negating in order to understand our own ontology here, as we must be able to dismiss false truth through the notion that discourse produces resistance. As counter discourses are ‘produced’ to provide new means of specifying truth, there can be no ultimately truthful discourse that the whole of cyberspace will buy into. Despite the problematic status, implosion as the production of hyperreality remains an interesting notion addressing media concentration. Baudrillard invents the term ‘cyberblitz’ to refer to the state after the affects of implosion. He is problematic here, whereas McLuhan is not, as he attempts to theorise the nature of society after it has imploded. This theory of hyperreality denies its own existence within reality. When events become simulated they lose their place in reality and exist within hyperreality. The notion of a ‘code’, addressing the erosion of a boundary between simulation and reality is another of

Baudrillard's problematic additions to McLuhan's theory. Whilst this code of total simulation is a useful conceptual vehicle for thinking about the effects of implosion, the fact that it is never sufficiently theorised renders it of limited value. The progressive commentary displayed in the excerpts from the Ctheory website, are used to problematise Baudrillard's theoretical contradictions. In the last one he is forced to theorise the invalidity of his own theory by the simulation/reality divide, which makes any possible application problematic. From this chapter we can conclude that although problematic when taken to the end of its logical articulation, simulation does provide the means to think about social technology in terms of media. Baudrillard's metaphysical position attempts to explore the relationship between technology and culture in the Western world as one of simulated communication. The perfect exemplification of this relationship is the avatar world. This is why I have sought to explicitly characterise the nature of these social spaces in Section Two. To conceptualize the social aspect I will now discuss the relevance of power through the vehicle of Foucault.

Foucault's model of decentralised power is perfect for the information age, and cyberspace in particular, with every point in the network being potentially as 'central' as the next. Power is exercised at the micro-level through individual discourse transactions, which cyberspace readily facilitates. The notion of 'bio power,' as a micro level regulatory mechanism existing at the level of discourse and operating on an individual subject, may be contrasted with ideology as a macro operation working on the collective. Both operations of power are relevant here, just as notions of the individual and collectivity in cyberspace coexist in relative harmony as micro and macro constructs. The

constitution of identity within avatar worlds is in constant flux according to the micro and macro operations of power.

The brief demonstration of genealogy shows its applicability in any context, though this too is well suited to cyberspace, as the surface appearance can be deceptively utopian. Genealogy invokes temporal recording of the historical formation of new discursive forms. Its goal, being to uncover previous legitimating ideologies. As a structure of macro analysis it can be contrasted with bio-power.

Throughout this thesis I have been developing the argument that simulation and power are the theoretical axis on which to map cyberspace phenomena such as avatar worlds. As a form of non-immersive virtual reality, the avatar world is positioned thus in relation to simulation. The human/machine interface can be theorised as the metaphorical doorway through which everything must pass in order to become simulated. Avatar worlds then, necessarily involve the human/machine interface, as they exist in cyberspace they involve the user in a form of simulation. Both the global village and implosion are exemplified in avatar worlds.

The significance of power is extremely relevant to the theoretical interrogation of avatar worlds. Given that the principle use of avatar worlds is to enable discourse transactions between people who do not necessarily know the physical location of the other party, Foucault's notion of power as constituted through discourse enables us to examine society through micro level interactions. Remembering that discourses are historically

situated means of specifying knowledge, it is through the formation of discourse that power and knowledge bond together. It is within the historical field of conflict and struggle then, that power relations are established, although now it is in a simulated global environment. As there can be no power without resistance, counter discourses produce new knowledge and ways of thinking. Thus 'truth' is never an absolute, as it is constituted through discourse. Through working from the bottom of society upwards, the analysis proposed by Foucault sees power as exercised rather than possessed. Thus, it is highly applicable here, as cyberspace is a global construct which problematises national social boundaries.

In positioning the avatar world as a model of technological humanity, and utilising the Foucauldian notion of identity as fluid, I have illustrated the potential for social technology to evolve with cyberspace. Electronic communication has enormous potential to illuminate established theories through their own application. For instance, McLuhan's theory of the media as an extension of the human nervous system is complemented by social technology. The theories of the global village and implosion are illuminated through the contextual example of a global network supporting both informational webpages, containing both media images and events, and avatar worlds as a social space for events to take place within. Although problematic, Baudrillard's theory of simulation is exemplified in the avatar world as the relationship between technology and culture. Hyperreality is illuminated as self-negating through its attempted application, although this is still a useful exercise as it helps us to understand Baudrillard's position. Foucault's theory of power is illuminated through its application to cyberspace, as by adding a

context the theoretical operation is highlighted. As a decentralised global network is being addressed, I do not believe any other theory of power would be applicable here.

As theoretical tools for the analysis of avatar worlds, the value of simulation and power is immense. The net effect of the theoretical positions outlined in this thesis is that, although not without pitfalls, we can achieve a greater understanding of social technology through the kind of analysis demonstrated here. The value of theory to cyberspace/avatar worlds and vice versa is a mutually beneficial relationship that remains worthy of deeper analysis. The potential for close examination exists even beyond this investigation. I will now provide a summary of the calls for further research made throughout this thesis.

