21A.850J / STS.484J The Anthropology of Cybercultures
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Student A

Virtual vs. Actual Dichotomy

Boellstorff's distinction between virtual and actual reminded me of two other dichotomies. First, the division between space and place that is often made in studies on environments to separate abstract, general ideas of space (virtual) from specific, personal connections to place (actual). Second, it reminded me of Castell's spaces of flows (virtual) and the spaces of places (actual). Like Boellstorff's, these other examples involve a certain amount of building or constructing through which some reality is created that cannot overcome time or even space. In his words, "Building could act as a craft – a form of techne – by which the virtual became real." (Boellstorff, p.101)

Reordering Environments

And of course as a result there are reorderings of places rather than wholesale replacements of place with impersonal, uniform space. These two quotations from The Cybercities Reader (Graham ed., Routledge 2004) articulate the debate about the role of spatial relationships post-internet and technology boom and show how we've moved from the "death of distance" (Cairncross) to more complex interconnections among different types of places.

(1) *"In the novel society now emerging – with its sophisticated and rapidly advancing science and technology, its complex social organization, and its internally integrated societal processes – the influence and significance of geographic distance and geographic place are declining rapidly. This is, of course, a most remarkable change. Throughout virtually all of human history, social organization coincided with spatial organization."* (Webber, 1968, Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences)

(2) *"In sum, the spatial forces set in motion by teleservice are complex, and sometimes tug in different directions at once. They can produce both decentralizing and recentralizing tendencies. They can break the bond between local demand and local supply of services, but they can also reinforce the dominance of established service centers."* (Mitchell, 1999, p.125)

In SL, these "decentralizing and recentralizing tendencies" seem pretty obvious if we compare the islands and skyboxes with the mainland developments and teleport hubs. In the "real world" Mitchell claimed the following: "But mobile connectivity, combined with reduced reliance upon immobile resources, has heightened the need, (…) to replace predetermined space programs and rigid plans with swiftly and sensitively responsive, electronically implemented space management strategies." (Mitchell, ME++, p.166) Perhaps the times when people aren't home in SL and their places are still accessible are examples of reusing spaces in more dynamic ways. Still, even on campuses we're still not very good at using rooms all the time despite attempts to provide all sorts of online scheduling tools for spaces. And dynamically assigned office spaces have not been

popular at al.

Time

For Boellstorff, time is one of the primary elements that makes SL virtual. No matter how much space can be compressed time remains a limiting factor that cannot be manipulated. This discussion reminded quite a bit of Lynch's studies of time in cities (What Time Is This Place?). (It's also very hard not to be reminded of Lynch's imageability while reading about SL.)

Tradeoff between Texture and Geometry

It's probably obvious especially to all the architects, but I was nonetheless struck by the clear tradeoff in SL between texture and geometry. Just like in any other 3D rendering environment the designer has two tools: you can either model the form of the object or apply a material that appears (from a specific view point) to embody that geometry. And when rendering 3D buildings, scenes, etc. it's also very important to build geometry for the foreground rather than the background where it will not be apparent to the person viewing the image.

This simple observation leads to a more profound one related to point-of-view. Boellstorff did not talk much about how people set their viewing angles of the scene. Do they view SL through the eyes (back of the head) of their avatar? Or do they turn things around and play with their avatar like their toys in a doll house?

WoW Pod by Cati Vaucelle & Shada/Jahn

Another theme that comes up in both readings and is not discussed in much detail is the role of the body. Boellstorff mentions players who are AFK because they are tending to the bodily needs --dinner-- of their families. And Taylor talks about "motion sickness" (p.11) as she adjusts to the rich visual environment of EQ. She also mentions the disconnect between the actions of sitting upright at a desk with a mouse and keyboard while navigating a complex virtual space like the underground caverns. Cati Vaucelle is trying to problematize this disconnect between the body and the experience online. The WoW Pod is one example and it's being shown right now at the MIT Museum.

Virtual Space Representations
Tron

Student B

virtual worlds as ethnography sites

In both studies the elicitation of virtual worlds as ethnography sites comes with a certain sense -and language- of discovery, Taylor entitles her first chapter "Finding New Worlds",

and Boellstorff theorizes about the (a bit grandiose) conception of the modern human as a "homo-cyber".

I think Boellstorff makes a case when, trying to dismantle notions of the virtual as 'less-human', relies on a conception of the 'human as virtual'. This can be a bit circular, but points to the fact that "humans exist in culture".

The argument is reminiscent of Geertz when he writes "…man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning."

More than the lengthy discussion on the sociological implications of the lag, I found the account of residents of second life attending to a party being asked to remove jewelry and shoes (to increase the overall refresh framerate of the sim), as a fascinating instance of a - certainly very human- new kind of virtual etiquette.

on commercial culture

I'm interested in the notion of what Taylor calls the "complex space of participant observer" (p.8); in both cases authors make explicit their personal enjoyment of the virtual worlds. However, I was expecting more discussion around the nature of these spaces as for-profit places of economic exchange.

In both authors the implications of the nature of the environments they work on as for-profit commercial spaces is little discussed. Taylor dismisses the issue by acknowledging the 'complicated relationship with commercial culture', while Boellstorff's takes SL as a given.

"Why do game companies continue to, often willfully, overlook potential markets for their products instead of cultivating new and diverse communities of players?" (Taylor, p.121)

This leaves me wondering what their first audience is thought to be. If we are to look into SL and EQ as a techne, a sort of collective artifact, as Boellstorff suggests, we should ask how we are construing its sense of purpose beyond its nature as a profitable business and as a sort of self-contained economy which could perhaps be reduced as a sophisticated hybrid of a mall and a casino.

gender

Taylor left me very curious about how the design team of the game is constituted. The questions she raises around gender roles in EQ could be better approached if we knew more about the design process of the game. Would an ethnography of the design process of the game itself be perhaps relevant to explore some of the questions she raises? (I agree making it would be perhaps less fun)

It also made me wonder if the discussion would be richer if, instead of looking exclusively at the construction of women's roles, the study looked more generally at the construction of 'gender-roles'. Masculline roles are briefly mentioned to just state that they're not as sexualized as women's, but there's probably more to it.

Student C

I agree with that the treatment of fieldwork in virtual environments is quite provocative in these readings, particularly because it forces the ethnographer to not only (re)consider the virtual/actual divide but also because the very nature of virtual suggests boundary work. It wasn't possible for Malinowski – or Geertz with his literary/psychological approach to culture – to transcend more than some boundaries of a culture. As Boellstorff notes, the notion that "'virtual' connotes approaching the actual without arriving there. This gap between virtual and actual worlds is critical: were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either. This is ultimately a reconfiguration of the binarism between nature and culture, and its boundary-marker is the distinction between 'online' and 'offline.'" Although this reconfiguration might feel a bit incomplete, I am taken by how much Geertz writings on the Balinese cockfights as a text and that "culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" resembles the ways in which early adherents of the Internet wrote about it as a text which could edited and re-edited (looking for actual quote). I am tempted to suggest that nowhere perhaps is this more explicit than in virtual worlds that allow individuals to inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously but perhaps this has always been a condition associated with interpretation and mobility.

To that end, I found an interesting connection between Taylor's comments about identity and Boellstorff's notion that individuals now have many worlds in which to live. I have been thinking about the worlding of cyberspace and that because of the particularities of internet regulations and search, identity shifts depending upon where an individual an individual is accessing the Internet. Examples include identity tourism where an individual might download an application like China Channel in order to "experience" China's filtered Internet. But more provocatively, it also describes the relationship between my online identity and my physical location when I access the Internet - the kind of information about my identity and my 'world' that is easily accessible online will appear completely different if I am online in Chicago or whether I am online in Buenos Aires. This does not so much challenge the notion that "lifeworlds" and "virtual selfhood" are something that people craft through intentional creativity but rather that the degree to which technology mediates between identity and the actual/virtual boundary is also spatially demarcated. I wonder if the anthropological equivalent might be to study a science lab, as anthropological accounts of these sites do not assume a totalizing grasp of identity, Helmreich's writing on artificial life reminds us, or Fiske's use of the term relevance to account for the dynamic shifts constantly occurring in popular culture.

And finally, as an aside I spent some amount of time thinking about civic

engagement. Games are increasingly held up as a space where players (citizens) can deepen notions of civic engagement as they might lessen the inherent risk of experimentation in the real world and (in the case of MMOs for example) encourage a cooperative approach to problem-solving and. As Taylor points out, game design that relies on what people say they want is very quite difficult, a "conservative approach" that "is actually more like marketing" and "rarely results in innovation." And yet one of the mantras of designing for a community is to build upon existing behaviors and/or tools. As Jesper Juul's quote about the overwhelming popularity of The Sims game and its focus on often mundane activities suggests not the danger of thinking about gamers – or a community – in monolithic terms but also underscores the importance of dynamic design. The tension between push and pull is implicit in every project, but perhaps this suggests that participatory design – or at least my thinking of it – requires a re-working as it relates to deepening engagement to better allow for multiple experiences and multiple engagements to exist outside of an explicitly gaming realm.

Student D – Yiftach Nagar

reading response delayed...
for representation of virtual reality, found something old... clips from Tron

1. Trailer
2. Lightbike Scene (30 seconds are probably enough to get the idea)
3. Discs (great...)

Student C

Here's some visuals/texts related to my thesis that involve virtual identities/cyberspace:

Malamud during the opening speech as Sec-General of the 1996 Internet Expo:

Marshall McLuhan, the philospher who became a famous media guru in the 1960s, had a saying: "the medium is the message." He meant that any medium–TV, radio, newspapers–changes the nature of the content it provides. …But "the medium is the message" means something else on the Internet. … We have another saying for this Internet World's Fair: "Finally, the medium isn't the message!" Our goal is to reach out to all walks of life, to see the amount of content on the Internet grow and change. The Internet is a fundamental infrastructure, a part of our daily lives. This technology is beginning to reach all of society and it is important that we take the time to make sure that the technology is relevant to all people, to all walks of life. The Internet shouldn't be a discussion group about computers, it should be a place where artists and world leaders and chefs and small businessmen are able to all participate in a technology as fundamental as radio, or electricity, or mass transit.
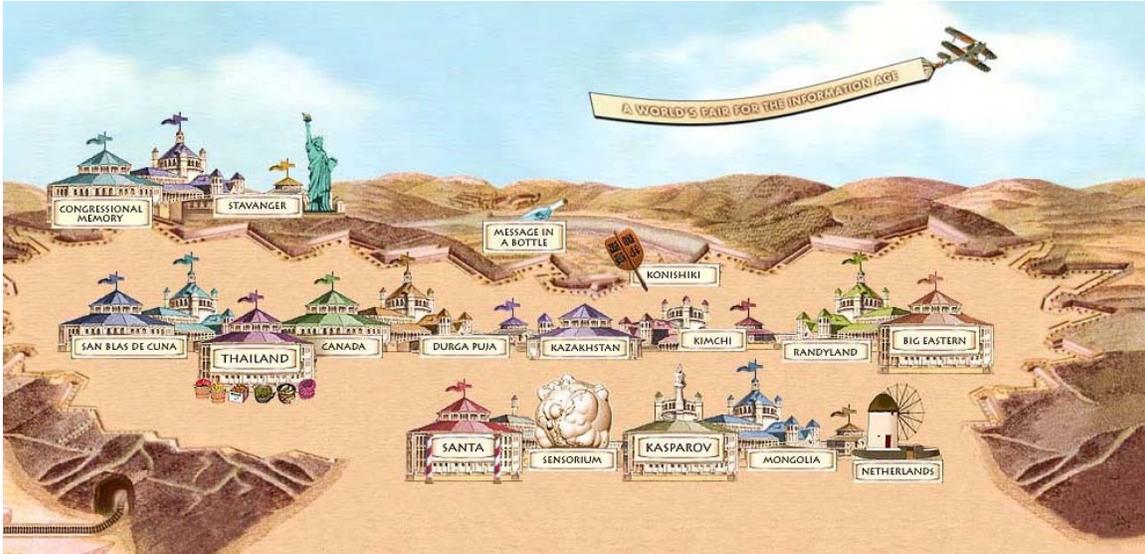
Courtesy of Carl Malamud. Used with permission.

Student E

The two reading is a great personal observation and for me it's almost like reading a novel. This else-world is a great way to explore human imagination and it's amazed me to know how wild and unique that imaginations could be.

Yet, I'm simply not capable of considering second life as another kind of dream. I'm not sure that this world is so much different than the real life we actually have. As Boellstorff try not to question the moral issue in the second life [p.5], it is that issue that I think made the second life and real life is pretty much the same. The idea that people tried or pretend to become someone else that they don't is so happen everyday in the real world. It's just a matter of visualizing that avatar.

Second-life might be very different if people tried to simulate what could we have in the real life, but with just a little gap between the present and the future, between the possibility and constructability.

As an architect, I have my own second-life or to be precise, my wannabe-life. That is when I tried to model my design and simulating how it can happen in the reality. I treat my wannabe-life as a transit terminal of my ideas. Some already take-off and landed in the real-life, some unlucky ones still sitting and wandering in the terminal. Yet, I think the sensation of playing with this delayed passengers is pretty much the same with playing those the avatar in the second-life or in the gaming world.