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What Is an Avatar?

Networked Gathering

On a warm Wednesday evening in Austin, Texas, midway through January 2006, Philip Rosedale, then CEO of Linden Lab, the inventors of Second Life (SL) virtual world, and a group of marketing executives sat together at a dinner party. The dinner followed a day-long seminar on the role of games in the burgeoning market of interactive media. In the laid-back atmosphere of the Tex-Mex margarita joint, the group stuck out not on account of its members' corporate attire among the cowboy hats, but rather for an activity colloquially known as "geeking out." Interspersed with the normal dinner conversation, they huddled together in small groups to watch, comment on, and occasionally type commands into the laptop computers they had on hand. Open on their screens was the digital vista of Second Life, a world made only of information, networked across a series of computer servers.

During the winter of 2006, there were 200,000 Second Life users. By 2008 over seven million people had visited the virtual world. Stories on the virtual world had appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*, in lifestyle and financial pages

of the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*, and it had been the subject of a dinner party at the Davos World Economic forum. On Google Trends, a search volume index, Second Life peaked at six million queries in 2007 and came to near zero—a flatline by early 2011. The hype cycle had run itself out. Second Life promised something a good number of people had been interested in investigating: a second life where they could look like and act like whatever they chose by using a digital avatar.

In contemporary language an avatar is a computer-generated figure controlled by a person via a computer. It is often a graphical representation of a person with which one can interact in real-time.[1] I make the case for an expanded definition of avatar that includes a wider array of media forms and platforms such as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), instant messaging (IM) and short message service or text messaging (SMS), and uses of social and locative media. I argue a broader scope of avatar activity in order to understand better how we are engaging current networked media.

I use the term "networked media" to describe technologies that are connected to a distributed transmission network such as the Internet or cell towers. In such a case, "networked" speaks to a technical affordance. However, I also use the term to invoke a cultural sense of connectivity with one another. Network theory outlines a set of behaviors to which a variety of systems—technical, natural, or social—adhere. One of the primary characteristics of a network is its distributed rather than hierarchical structure. As opposed to a regimented order, network connections can happen across nodal points in a multitude of directions.[2, 3] A networked gathering then, as I attribute it, involves both a technical and cultural sense of "networked." In the cultural dimension of network, the great shift I see is the connection between online and offline experiences.

Over the span of its visibility and eventual niche reinstatement, what Second Life actually delivers is not so much an escape to another life but rather an experience networked across virtual and real engagement. Like other emerging media technologies of the early twenty-first

1. Real-time means synchronous perception of an activity or thing as opposed to asynchronous perception. For example, a phone call is real-time but a film is asynchronous. Networked media has begun to conflate the two categories, but one can still make basic distinctions between the two states in terms of the technical affordances of a platform.

2. Physicist Albert-László Barabási developed the important concept of scale-free networks that explains why points of connectivity organize in hubs as opposed to even distribution. Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What it Means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life* (New York: Plume, 2003); Albert-László Barabási, Mark Newman, and Duncan J. Watts, *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

3. Sociologist Manuel Castells discusses a net-work society that re-distributes the power of economies, identity, and nationality on account of the horizontal skew of self-organizing societal networks. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. 1 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2000).

century that possess the qualities of real-time interactions, visualization and a sense of inhabiting space together, the virtual world offered everyday media users an experience that was neither entirely virtual nor real but *vividly actual*.

Despite appearances, the members of the dinner party were not so much exhibiting antisocial behavior as intensified hypersocial behavior. At the same moment they gathered in Austin Texas, Lawrence Lessig, an Internet scholar and intellectual property lawyer based in Stanford, California at the time, stood in Second Life, reading from his book, *Free Culture*—actually, a three-dimensional simulation of Lessig—his avatar—stood at a virtual podium and addressed an audience of Second Life denizens, some of whom were sitting hundreds of miles away in Austin (see figures 1.1 to 1.4).

One of the members of the Austin party was a round-faced Jewish planning executive. In Second Life he appeared as a trim African freedom fighter dressed in a tuxedo, sitting in the front row of the virtual amphitheater, enjoying the talk and, from time to time, doing in-game chatting with friends. But perhaps it was Rosedale's seamless overlapping of dinner-party banter and his role as master of virtual ceremonies that best demonstrated this peculiarly contemporary paradox—he was actually in two places at once. Here was a magic trick I wanted to understand.

A virtual world exists on a computer server, or, a series of servers configured to allow many people to simultaneously access the same information. The network effect of a virtual world allows real-time interactions among the players. This means we can have synchronous conversations and direct feedback. Built of computer code, a virtual world presents to players persistent information about where they are, what is happening, and what things look like. Text-based virtual worlds are now more than twenty years old. For text-based worlds, visualization takes place in the imagination as one must read through descriptions of fellow players and the context. In graphical worlds, the computer network generates an image that everyone can see. Additionally, when I add something to the world, e.g., a new room

Reading *Free Culture*: Avatar Mien Shirakawa sits on Democracy Island in Second Life, reading a virtual copy of *Free Culture* by Lawrence Lessig. Credit: Johan S, Creative Commons License

Fig.1.1

Portal between worlds: Lawrence Lessig is reading *Free Culture* in Second Life, with his avatar standing at the front of the amphitheater while his live image is broadcast via video stream. Credit: Rich115, Creative Commons License

Fig.1.2

A Participant's view: Lawrence Lessig's book reading in Second Life, as seen by an audience member. Credit: thelast-minute, Creative Commons License

Fig.1.3

Virtual star power: Avatars of author Lawrence Lessig, founding Second Life CEO Philip Rosedale, and embedded virtual world journalist Wagner James Au at Lessig's Second Life reading. Credit: Rich115, Creative Commons License

Fig.1.4

to a dungeon or a red hat on my avatar's head, everyone can see that virtual space or object as well.

That night in Austin, I witnessed a networked gathering. Walking up and down the aisles of the amphitheater, I saw a siren decked out in a skin-tight pantsuit and platforms, a creature that had a fox-like furry face and human body, and an array of characters who looked as though they had walked right out of a cyberpunk novel with their wild clothes, mohawks and vaguely futurist accoutrement. As far as I could tell, everyone had beautifully fit and perfectly sculpted avatar bodies, even the creature with the fur mug. Dressed that day in business casual, in the virtual world CEO Philip Rosedale sported spiky brown hair, a Rolling Stones red lips T-shirt, and custom jeans with a gem codpiece. In the Second Life world, he appeared cooler than in life. The general feel of the assembled avatars exuded a carefully groomed, hip lifestyle; a combination of experimental hair cuts, flashy clothing and perfectly fit bodies. Above the head of each avatar floated a sign box, announcing avatar names and local affiliations.

How we got to the Lessig reading, that is, the technical infrastructure that enabled this rich graphic environment, was secondary. On the user's end, the only stipulation for being there was a robust Internet connection and a Second Life account which, at the minimum level of participation, is free. On the server side, what we saw before us was five years of development by Linden Lab come to term, the technical issues having faded into the background. Why people chose to be there was the first question that came to my mind. This gathering made clear three traits of networked media that I came to see across the different platforms I investigated: the extension of communication, community, and collaborative systems.

When I use the word "platform" to describe networked media, I am referencing what a technology can do: its attributes and behaviors, along with the implicit cultural protocols built into its design.[4] In this sense, software, a virtual world, and an actual city all represent types of platforms. The cultural protocol of a technology, as defined by

4. For a discussion of the emerging field platform studies, see the introduction to Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost, *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

media scholar Lisa Gitelman, describes how users adopt and adapt platforms.[5] I argue that the networked tools available for everyday use provide technological affordances of real-time connectivity and visualization that have not been previously available. The adoption of the technologies and their integration into the fabric of daily life reflect new behaviors of engagement that we have created. I am not arguing for a technological determinism where the platform makes the user. Rather, I am suggesting a combinatory practice where platform design influences types of use and users influence the platform design.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, sociologist Michel de Certeau introduces the idea of studying quotidian practices as critical to understanding our lives and the society in which we live. In that work, he looks at how people reformulate the objects, places, and languages of their settings to make them habitable.[6] De Certeau uses the analogy of a rented apartment to describe how people take a borrowed space and transform it into a place of their own. In this book I look at daily practices around networked media. I describe and analyze changes in both the design of new media platforms and the cultures we have developed around their engagement. I am calling this change X-reality, which describes the mutual impact of real and mediated engagement.

X-Reality: How Are Your Worlds Colliding?

I am calling this sense of being in two places at once X-reality, by which I mean an interlacing of virtual and real experiences. Traditionally "x" as a prefix has meant "cross," where one finds a bridge between one thing and another. For example, cross-reality design, a category within pervasive computing, describes primarily sensor networks that informationally connect real spaces to virtual ones.[7] I am reappropriating the x of X-reality to stand for an x-factor or variable, as it would in an equation. In positing an X-reality, I am advocating for multidirectional and multivalent understanding of the nature of pervasive media. In this sense, X-reality describes a world that is no longer

5. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2006).

6. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press Berkeley, 1984).

7. Beth Coleman, "Using Sensor Inputs to Affect Virtual and Real Environments," *IEEE Pervasive Computing 8*, no. 3, (July–Sept 2009): 16–23.

distinctly virtual or real but, instead, representative of a diversity of network combinations. With X-reality, I mark a turn toward an engagement of networked media integrated into daily life, perceived as part of a continuum of actual events. This is a movement away from computer-generated spaces, places, and worlds that are notably outside of what we might call real life and a transition into a mobile, real-time, and pervasively networked landscape.

As discussed above, I take de Certeau's idea of quotidian practices and ask what happens when daily life now includes a culture of pervasive networked media. Despite the fact that I am a lifelong fan of the comic book heroes the X-Men (a global group of mutants who, on a regular basis, save the world from super villains), my use of X-reality is staunchly, even stodgily placed in the practices of everyday media use. The field studies, research initiatives, and design perspectives I discuss excavate a sense and sensibility of the actual—not real or virtual but the networked media experiences that are now embedded in much of daily life.

Over the last decades of Internet use, terms such as "virtual reality," "cyberspace," and "online" represent a form of engagement that stands outside of the geographically and corporally bounded world we occupy. With the concept of X-reality, I see an end of the virtual or more precisely an end of the binary logic of virtual and real. What has emerged from our collective use of networked technologies is an engagement that moves across sites that are real, simulated, and variously augmented.

Despite the fact of being geographically dispersed, the visual presence of the people assembled at the Second Life event, in the form of avatars, gave the feeling that we were all there at the place. We have had the mediated experience of being in the same time with each other, being temporally synchronous as it were. Many of us have participated in rapid fire email or IM sessions where one person may be in Tokyo and the other New York, but the online conversation happens simultaneously. The thirteen-hour time difference disappears.