

**Maintaining the Digital Embodiment**

Andrew Bucksbarg

January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007

## **BEGIN OTHER**

The imaginary of the networked, augmented self is unitary, but the real practice of this multi-identity self, this multiplicity of being in the cybernated, social database, is far from a cohesive, organic and maintained system. Networked subjectivity is supplemental, like a link on a page, a page on a site, a node on a network or a server in a circuitous expanse of actions and authoring, it is supplemental in both time and in information. This is the dynamic of networked subjectivity; it requires a ritualized practice, a kind of constant grooming. Not only are these static data zones continually invaded by the process of the self, but there is also a quality of media saturation that requires and reproduces a myriad of differing selves that shed and collect stiffly in archives and databases. These samples of self sequentially assault the perceived purity of identity. These fragments make us work at how we construct ourselves. The trajectory of this cybersociety is one of mediations of technologies, newly found in social software, synthetic metaverses and networked multiplayer games and the like, which require the continual gardening of the informational.

## **DEFAULT SUBJECTS AND SIMULATED OTHERS**

Newer media and technologies want to play around with difference and otherness as pleasurable attire, as commodity. There are varying intensities of otherness that vacillate by degree. The networked subject embodies competing intensities of fluidity/fixity, limitation/expanse, augmentation/foreshortening, embodiment/disembodiment, singularity/multiplicity, temporal change/stagnation and the self in a myriad of otherness. For example, the intensities in user/avatar relations- "I control the avatar," "the avatar and I are one and the same," "I am using an avatar of the opposite sex." Otherness is also produced in the manufacture of false profiles or shrines to celebrities or lost loved ones in social software like Facebook or MySpace, practices which call on virtualities to merge with artificial intelligence or the simulation of personalities. New media like these, such as networked simulated worlds or metaverses, which are collaborative, meta-design systems and community/communicative practices, foster these multiplicities and differentiations. Even their names signify the otherness they foster- *Second Life* (in addition the first), *There* (in addition to here), or *Active Worlds* (extending the notion of a plurality of worlds to inhabit.) The safe, manageable practice of wearing the guise of the other is apparent in the pleasurable act of role-playing environments and is also seen in the frequency of gender flipped avatars. What are we becoming with such an impetus to otherness, alternative or difference and is this really such an open, idealized space?

We can think of information as becoming much more like an avatar as we desire these embodied informational structures. More than representations of the self; they are performances or cybernetic enactments of the subject that project the body onto undifferentiated information. Yet, these avatars move beyond the metaphor of the body to produce something quite different, something other and otherwise unknowable- a psycho-physiological orbital of the subject and simulation. This is the informational cyborg, quite different than the emergence from the human and machine. Here we converge upon artificial intelligence, participatory culture and physiological and environmental sensors and interfaces. Managing this space, we are confronted with the work of this new media practice- a process of updating, articulating, administrating and organizing information about ourselves and longing for an intelligent, secondary self. We long to merge in this stream of dissolution of the self in the tide of new media subjectivity.

We often rely on corporate templates offered to assist us in managing our networked identities. These are loose descriptors and default settings, like favorite movies, music, etc., in neat rows of basic questions. We can think of this as the default other. Profiles and avatars in cyberspace are portals through which we move through information and simulate ourselves, and so, they are limiting as much as they are “limbs”, compressing and inorganically simplistic. We can regard this media as constriction, as well as extension. The cookie cutter default other is the profile template or default avatar that conforms us as a commodification of online identity. The default other is a means to codify and normalize us into social systems created and reproduced by industry and we require an industry of technical support to maintain such systems.

Simulated worlds confront us with the onion-skin layers of subject and otherness in the display interface of the virtual, graphical and textual. Herein collects semi-fixed layers of otherness or identity debris in the form of user names, profiles, online identities and avatars that create a schism of the self. These elements of the subject never quite fit and are always in need of modification or updating. We can never maintain this embodiment; the new media subject creeps behind the moment-to-moment construct of the self. This new mediated subject is not only a body, but simulates and augments the intellect and body or a body that is data, a body that is changeable, technically limited, but also requires change and maintenance.

In this realm, it is not information that we crave, it is meaning or context. This leads to an ever-evolving complexity of how one simulates and performs oneself in these new techno-societies. These social practices lead us to wonder if there is only difference and

differentiation, however we may struggle toward unity, through extremes of force and domination. Our media and technologies form us as the other, as they demand more of our time for maintenance and structure in the chaos of desktops and directories. In the prescription of the default subject, archives of identifiers must be created and maintained, but they lack in the biological. Their machinic logic is the cement from which we cannot escape and their supplement is the fracture we continuously attempt to heal or update. They require our constant maintenance as our biologic selves outgrow these others. Even their attempts at a biologic will be the offspring of otherness, an artificial life, and an intermediate to our being.

Are networked simulated worlds are much more similar to our dreams and imaginings than to the clunking improbability of a physical world? Unlike traditional media forms, do video games, simulations and other newer media perform the opposite of the suspension of disbelief? Do they encourage an extension of the imaginable? If the utopic promise of humanity is creative imagination, then it makes sense that methodologies for communication and content creation, which form a blank screen onto which this imagination can occur, are the ideal medium- the metaverse or meta design system. Still, if these metaverses expand imaginative potential, they fall short in the complexity and randomness of our primary world. Chance occurrences and accidents are lacking. A “glitch” in the system is much more apparent and culturally over-ripe or even problematic, such as crashing the system. Exponential growth in computing power will bring about more complex, real-time rendered virtual worlds, but we follow behind wondering if it is really the technology or excitement being sold to us? We answer our own prayers to a god of technology who is never quite what we are led to believe.

The expanse of potential in simulation is viewed as a world of possibilities for free exploration and the invention of the self, but in this realm we have to confront the likelihood that political problems in actual realms are also reproduced in the simulations we create. As Lisa Nakamura writes regarding race in cyberspace, “Old media provide the foundation for the new, and their means of putting race to work in the service of particular ideologies is reinvoked, with a twist, in the new landscape of race in the digital age.”<sup>1</sup> If old media are remediated or converge into new media, likewise we must consider social, cultural and political practices as well as the techniques and technologies that support them. This re-exploration and appropriation of the other or difference becomes a problem when it exists of a subtle, yet

---

<sup>1</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 14-15.

concentrated scaffold of power and social abuses. This is even more the case when the pleasure of this process is predicated upon both the dynamics of difference and the abuse of power. We can only hope that it is not political correctness, but sensitivity, tolerance and understanding that comes forth to challenge qualities like the whiteness of a default avatar (blue eyes, blond hair)<sup>2</sup> or the facility or representation of a particular gender in new media work.<sup>3</sup> Still, this expansive, connective potential has been pursued by communities who benefit from the social and political possibilities of new medias, for example, rural populations of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Transgender people, who already have a sense of the fluidity of gender, find the liquid nature of identity and gender flipping on the Internet particularly appealing.<sup>4</sup>

A common theme in science fiction is authenticity. With simulation the “authentic self” becomes arbitrary. We do not know who the duplicate is, what is sequential and repetitions become problematic. The fear of being consumed by offspring or by the other is frequently articulated in these narratives, but also in lives the technology and the medias themselves-being overwhelmed by the frequency and speed of technology and the saturation of media. We may have feelings of being lost or trapped in a “net” or “world wide web”, problems navigating and creating meaning in endless databases or feeling the muted, constrained limits in the mastery of the virtual puppet when dumped into a welcome area or demo space. The simulated other for inexperienced users appears in many instances to be the antagonist. This brings back the fear articulated in sci-fi narratives of new media ideologies of interaction, feedback or cybernetics of the doppelganger, the replicant replacement or the snake eating its tail- the old fear of the new. The dialectical relation of self and other collapses in the complexity of being. Simplicity can only linger on the surface, but beyond the methodology of the subject rests a phenomenological field strewn with relations of self in other(s), in species, objects, and environments and in the new media of the simulated or virtual. Projected upon this is our strong desire at unity or the undifferentiated, but beyond is a wealth of relations and collapses of the self. How do we come to explore the technologically mediated phantom body as otherness, as a complex plurality of profiles, identifiers and avatars? How do we browse a traumatic fracture of perceptive consciousness, physical sensation, a dissolution of time, the horrors of data-cannibalism and anti-society, within our dreams of media as extension and

---

<sup>2</sup> Virtual worlds have started to randomize aspects of avatars.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Allucquere Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1995).

empowerment of the self, the pleasure of play and process, and a social augmentation- the cyber body, hyper body, post body?<sup>5</sup>

### **EMBODIED OTHERS**

I will use the word body in the sense of a whole system, one that requires food, aches, feels pleasure or pain, contains cognitive processes- an embodied mind, a psycho-physiological system. In the delirium of new media and technologies, I forget my body in one manner and construct it in another. Subtle techniques of the embodied system change. A callous on my middle finger, from writing, fades as I come to use the keyboard. I form a relational logic, as I perceive the world through portals, pages, windows and screens. My embodied mind is the mediator of my data being, certain segments expand, other parts of the system contract. The popular mythology of a true cyber-citizen is someone who must overcome the physical, confined to the interface, more than human; the amped-up and hyper-mediated uploaded intellect. Writers and theorists discuss the politicality of the fluid identity in cyberspace in a safe, playful network of otherness, but what of the embodiment and its extension through the technology and what of the foreshortening and limitations therein? We play the cool performance of new media, stoking our technology in extremes of myopic focus and complete augmentation, but can we really download our intellect into the machine without some kind of physical foreclosure?

N. Katherine Hayles writes- "The posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life."<sup>6</sup> A system of being cannot separate impressions on the body, the senses, cognitive functioning and the general physical health and state of the subject. Yet, there remain different occurrences with the human system, strange blips of experience. Running on a treadmill gives you the sensation of running, without the change of environment. You become sensitized to the motion in your legs. Afterward, once you get off the treadmill, you have a strange experience of moving while you are moving, a kind of embodied out-of-body or hyper-embodied experience, much like walking on an automatic walkway gives you the sense of walking twice as fast, even as you are traveling at your normal rate. Nothing has really changed physically, but your brain still retains the sensation of running on the treadmill, while you are walking, thus giving you a disoriented sensation. This hyper-embodied state demonstrates how experience in a virtual system can influence or

---

<sup>5</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

mediate our physical bodies by influencing our psycho-physiological system. We have to consider the delirium of staring at screens for said system or the potential media messaging or influence in a virtual system where everything is fabricated.

The inexperienced user of new media can feel awkward, but with repetitive experience one can gain facility and merge into a pleasurable flow or optimal experience,<sup>7</sup> that as long as then electricity flows, does not need to end. Online massively multiplayer games and virtual worlds are set up in this manner, unlike the three act structure of a film or the chapters in a novel, there are no real ending points. New quests are added, virtual worlds are constantly constructed and social experiences, like forums and chat, never seen the dark of night.

This newly mediated body is a source of pleasure for some, and for others, perhaps an out-of-body moment, where they relive a visceral, bodily memory of the shocking moments of inexperience or the bewilderment at learning some complex technologic machine, like an automobile. The technology of the automobile is an often-used example of a highly complex interface process that through practice and use becomes transparent. Drivers can take pleasure in the human-machine relationship, feeling “one with the road.” The use of new media and technologies like games and virtual worlds function similarly, through repetition and experience the user takes pleasure in this autonomous, embodied flow. This practice produces a human-technologic symbiosis, that on the surface, appears to dispense with the body and even the intellect, in the systemic flow of embodied pleasure and play.

Although there is a definite difference between our actual bodies and simulation, such as our avatars, databases of our information or chat identities, we should not assume the correlation is not complex and relational. Notions of embodiment mean that our psychology develops from the brain/body’s physiology. Anyone who has pulled their car off the road and looked around frantically while listening to a song that has an emergency siren in it knows that actual and simulation can create psychological and physiological responses. In the end, it is not so much what is happening to us, as it is about what we believe is happening to us. Comparing these new medias, it is important to note that they incorporate and immerse the user-participant in a different manner than old media, where the system of depiction and reception, of say a film, allows for a particular kind of critical distancing. In new media like simulations and games, you are there at a mode of representation, but also presentation, generation, action, reaction,

---

<sup>7</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (Harper Perennial Press, 1990).

performance, input, feedback, as well as a complexity of choices and interactions. You are doing or being a different kind of embodiment, one that puts you or simulates you at the center at the protagonist of a more complex social, political and ethical otherness, one that can never dispose of your actual body and its needs.

### **SOCIAL OTHERNESS AND SIMULATED SOCIETIES**

The subject formed in new media comes from a recipe of embodied selfhood, increasingly coalesced in an interpersonally embodied media. New technologies are expanding the social aspects of new media. There is an exponential increase in the social applications of new media and technologies, such as massively multiplayer games and simulated worlds. Social networking websites are among the most visited sites on the internet and Blizzard Entertainment, maker of the online massively multiplayer game, has over five million subscribers. Interactivity has converged with participation. We have moved from the “user interface” to the “social interface” in new media. Think for instance, about early applications of information technologies, such as Vannevar Bush’s proposed *Memex*, which meant to be an extended, personal intellectual record, like an interactive microfiche with links and associations, as well as Alan Kay and Adele Goldberg’s *Dynabook*, the first laptop, “a dynamic and personal media.” We can compare these early approaches with current media and technologic uses, such as massively multiplayer and virtual environments, social networking software, as well as mobile media and communications, to see how the social in media is growing in complexity and potential. New media subjectivity, unlike older forms of media, which form the subject through reference and object (identity formed through favorite media, like movies and music on DVD and CD), arises in the construction and participation of the media; the ownership, agency, collaboration and co-production of the media, as well as the quality of media embodiment- how one uses the attire of media, its mobility and location. New media are social media and this social aspect of media and technology must be accounted for in any research and analytic practice.

We all know instances of the cyborg collective or hive, a complex social system of biological and machinic material with a collective intelligence or the insect-like singularity of an enemy. Aside from the negative connotation, do we see a move from the individual, from notions of the subject to the social being producing a social otherness through new media? Do we live in this collective or hive logic and is it possible to trace states of being which draw about a decentralized, multi-user processes? When we participate in group activities, such as posting to online forums, we become the social other. We recognize a need and come forward to fill a space. This social other is informational (cyberspace), spatial (global simulated worlds),

temporal (relational exchanges and time pressured interactivities) and participatory (multiple passes and exchanges of real-time contributory content creation). Are these element new to media? Not necessarily, but the facility and ease with which they have converged in simulation is quite new. Simulation, as it matures with artificial intelligence is poised to revolutionize society, it is global and continuous.

Social otherness is exemplified in the concept of the symborg and the symbioborg. The symborg is a symbolic organism, such as an artificially intelligent avatar or agent. A symbioborg is the symbiotic merging of two species into one flowing, mutually beneficial unit. Symbolic organisms or avatars will emerge as artificially live or “alife” entities. They will extend into our world by controlling devices and environments, even becoming our friends and caretakers. We could also think of them as programmed clones of our specific needs and they will emerge as the robotics of function and evolve to the synthetic. Symbioborgs are examples of the kinds of relationships between humans and symbolic organisms we can expect in the future and are exemplified in the relations of humans and other species, such as the interdependence of a person and a “pet.” In these cybernetic relationships, the human provides food, shelter and caring and the pet species provides the comfort of companionship and the pleasure and need of caring for another being. Shared virtual environments and even shared avatars could be examples of a kind of social otherness that occurs in content creation and performance. This “socioborg” or collective mentality is only beginning to develop between humans and simulated media.

## **END OTHER**

The binary world of devouring, alien hoards pouring at the first person shooter is the clearest expression, the exactitude of the moment where we can feel solidified in being and purpose. Post utopian narratives of the self uncover improbabilities of the self, where the user finds their experience complicit and inextricably bound to the fate of the enemy or perhaps even bound with or as perpetrator. In some cases we are the (other) detrimental operation, and it is the other who must set things right. In the complexity of a biological system, nothing can be returned to, there is only change or the temporary imposition of a simulation of past states. We can form an analysis of the reflectance of game media, but this mirroring or depiction and reception is shattered when we reach to the mirage of simulation and all things change when the other is linked to the actions of our desires. In new media we choose to be alien, we choose the avatar. Yet, these choices are only shattered expressions. These fragments, multiplicities and otherness produced by our media activities are at the same time components of realities and complicit to our knowledge of being, but in the same moment exterior, foreign

and unknown. Our media are manipulatable mirrors and puppets, at the same time as they are embodied and performed configurations extending the self. They collect in databases and outdated techniques and technologies as dead, lost fragments. How do we keep pace with such archives of techno-identity?

New media and technologies have been described as extensions, augmentations and prosthesis, but we must also consider them as fractures, fragments and multiplicities of the subject. Older media seem detached, like something we have shed- an object like a book or segmentation like a television program and we are viewers or spectators in the dialectic of representation. This compares to the fluidity of newer media practice which relies heavily on user performance, interaction and multi-user, multi-modality participation. We cannot consider these time-pressured simulations in the same realm. New media perform a mirroring otherness and this is why media tell us something of our human qualities in their reflecting fragments. The more complex the doppelganger system, the more distance from our myriad of senses, the more compression of these senses, the less humanized are our communications. Expression becomes information in the trajectory of the biological through the machine code and into the simulation. The augmented intellect becomes the fractured, media saturated, infinitely configurable, yet static, complex system. It would be fair to consider these new technologies and media not only as extensions or prosthetics, but also terminations and limitations. Layers of embodiment and identity become undistinguished in this place. I am what my exterior projects, as much as what I think or desire. I am what others think of me and what I think others think of me. Navigating layers of otherness of this media maelstrom becomes a practice in itself. Monitoring and maintaining these systems is an informational means of constructing the subject. Avatars in simulations “perceptualize” the apparatus of the body and interface with databases, but they do not have the full capability of sensation-perception-action. They are something other, they are virtual puppets and we are always asking ourselves how to embody them. “Systems of virtual reality transmit more than images; they transmit quasi-presence. Clones, the visible agents or marionettes that we control by our gestures, can affect or modify other marionettes or visible agents and can even remotely activate ‘real’ devices and operate in the ordinary world.”<sup>8</sup>

Moving through synthetic three-dimensions, the user is confronted with the supplemental; iconic extensions, juxtapositions of information, simulated presence and acts of data

---

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Levy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*. (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), p. 39.

embodiment. Simulated worlds exist, but do not exist in that they supplement how we know ourselves in transmissions, streams, databases, etc. “The body escapes itself, acquires new velocities, conquers new spaces. It overflows itself and changes technological exteriority or biological alterity into concrete subjectivity.”<sup>9</sup> We must temper this with the knowledge of technological determinism, that this escape is likewise capture and these new velocities and conquerings may be unnecessary. We add as well that technology shortens the body, removes the body and imposes its own machinic logic upon us, a logic that can be both an inspiring flight in a digital realm or at other times the communicative immobility and lack of expressive complexity of a dead metal suit. When we think about our reflectance in new media, we are confronted with the problematics of this mediated self. We are challenged with the endlessly configurable in menu options and avatars. We engage in the practice of compressing ourselves into blurb-like containers, such as “about me,” and profiles that begin as templates of favorite movies, music and avatar default settings that need continual updating. We are dumped into demos and welcome areas and we exist somewhere in the detritus memories of user names and passwords and abandoned email accounts, collecting endless amounts of spam. We no longer linger on actual objects of media, like CDs or DVDs, but we subscribe to our media information. We find ourselves as mediated others, targets in a simulated worlds of fabrication. The biologic is compressed by the machinic. The biologic is foreshortened by the simulation.

Aside from the freshness and excitement of new media, where we are astounded by the grand narrative of the technologic, we must come to wonder how these complex systems lack and limit us, and in this process, produce something supplemental and other- disjunctures like the symborg or cyborg, phantasms abandoned in an exponentially changing new media wasteland. For it is only a brief time-span before the mobile device is too big or the computer is too slow and our avatar is just a simple caricature that cannot support our folding self and we make our escape to the new.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

## References

Csikazentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. (Harper Perennial Press, 1990).

Hayles, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Nakamura, Lisa, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

Levy, Pierre, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*. (New York: Plenum Press, 1998).

Stone, Allucquere Rosanne, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1995).