Life By Design: Everyday Digital Culture - Virtual Resistance   Tobey Crockett

One of the originating concepts of this conference is the notion that we have reached a second wave of digital analysis and critique; no longer plain vanilla technophiles, blue sky phantasists, or Luddites, we have gone beyond.   One could only expect there to be room for improvement at this relatively early moment of academic inquiry into and critical professionalization of digital culture; extant theories of the digital and the virtual leave room for critique. I am drawing on a loose metaphor from the three waves of feminism to suggest that digital technologies have issues sui generis which flow from one moment in history to another, that digital technologies have histories which extend deeply into time, and that not all uses of digital technology are the same. I would hope that we are not only at a second wave, but that we can surmise even a third wave of digital studies.

Moving away from a watery metaphor to a pastoral one, I imagine we have been taking a walk through a landscape both familiar and yet unknown to us. The woods are becoming more and more dense, indeed we are in a deep forest without at first noticing the change, yet more and more trees are looming all around us, when suddenly we come upon a clearing. Here we are, standing in a spot of sunlight and open air, while all around us lies the rest of the woodland, beckoning, threatening and confusing us with potential pathways. How shall we proceed from here? It may seem odd to choose such an old fashioned metaphor drawn from nature (and to a lesser extent Heidegger) to parse a moment in the burgeoning digital culture, but I suspect that our apparent remove from deep-seated issues associated with nature and pathfinding, even old humanist projects, is

not as far away as we might like to think. I would like to explore these woods a little further, and suggest that now is a good moment to try an alternate mapping of our digital landscape and history.

There is more than one way to read the history of what is turning out to be digital culture. There are many positions which offer opposing and even incompatible views, yet the sum total of these literatures may be said to form a canonical mooring point around which the 'loosely joined' studies of cyberculture are gathering themselves. There are disciplinary approaches which delineate the objects of study as adhering to a previous and continuous history, whether visual or textual, and there are others which form themselves around practices of inquiry and social transaction, and there are still others which insist only on the practice of culture-making itself. There are also less acknowledged histories whose roots lay outside the traditional prescriptions of disciplinarity, institutional structures and a 'professionalizing' discourse. Some very interesting portions of the converging digital cultures inhabit this under-theorized zone as well.

Approaches which are informed by a quasi-formal analysis of structure, image and text are a good jumping off point for much theorization about cyberculture. For example, one visually rooted tradition steadily examines the materiality of the box, an inheritor of the screen and the situatedness of the spectator. Drawing on perspectivalism and cinema studies, this tradition posits the virtual as simulacrum and inheritor of a scopic and visually-driven history. Theorists working this rich historical vein include Anne Friedberg, Lev Manovich, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin and Barbara Maria Stafford, among many others. Contrast this to a tradition which opts for a more literary

and textual analysis, seeing the content of webpages and the flexible textuality of hypertext as a major point of departure for theorization.   The inter-relationship of new media with earlier forms, and the power of imagination as a foundation for the actual development of technologies, are among the many topics parsed by this category of textual analysis. Theorists such as George Landow, Mark Poster and N. Katherine Hayles are referenced by this general category.

Other pockets of historical theorization of cyberculture include the fantastical and the pragmatic. There are a remarkable number of spiritually inclined histories of cyberculture whose authors examine previous moments of cultural aspiration and their influence upon the development of digital technologies. This most often expresses itself as a desire to embrace what is perceived as the transcendent nature of the virtual. Margaret Wertheim, Erik Davis and Richard Coyne all analyze this urge in various ways. Among the more extreme proponents of the transcendent potentials of cybertechnologies, Hans Moravec, Ray Kurzweil and Howard Bloom stand out in their ventriloquy of the aspirations of cybertechnologies in their quest for self-organizing supremacy, enabled through the acquisition of artificial intelligence and artificial life. And while engineers, scientists, mathematicians, programmers and others in the applied sciences may not even consider themselves as a part of history, may even abhor the notion that they are subject to humanist inquiry, indeed, they are. While these technical aspects of cyberculture are not spared from critique, they do not particularly qualify for ventriloquy either, so while Bruno Latour, Sandra Harding and many others offer us insight into the history of science and all it has to teach us about the culturally biased underpinnings of an allegedly objective discipline, that is not to dismiss the great usefulness of science or its

approaches. We need to include them and embrace them along with the rest of the disciplines, themselves also all too subject to everyday or ordinary human fallibility and bias.

Among the wide variety of digitally inclined pragmatists, those who combine both a concrete knowledge of actual practices as well as ideas about theory, philosophers Michael Heim, David Weinberger and James Slevin stand out for making balanced, specific and still fairly optimistic contributions to the literature surrounding digital cultures. Their analysis of the structures of the Internet and its associated digital technologies examine both theory and case studies, astutely raising questions about applications as they may be experienced by a more everyday user. Gender approaches are also often characterized by a hard won practicality and specificity of examples, albeit with a more activist approach. Anthologies of cyberfeminist critique abound with examples of activism, resistance and critical inquiry, collections edited by Wendy Harcourt, Mary Flanagan and Jennifer Terry and their colleagues coming to mind. Questions of whether or not there is a characteristically gendered approach in the ways various users employ, design and resist computing and related information technologies also taps into histories of science and technology, as well as the gendering of the public and private domains, consumerism and related areas of critical inquiry.

Interactivity, pluralism and relationality are frequently key words for digital culture, which, as previously noted in the introduction to the Life By Design: Everyday Digital Culture symposium, may as often be seen to impact the ways in which people use technologies to relate to one another as to characterize a solo engagement between human and machine. There are many studies of concrete, transactional practices and social

behaviors which are enabled by digital technology and the formation of a virtual public space. This category includes more theatrical or performative approaches, famously described by Janet Murray, Brenda Laurel and Andrew Stern, while the practice of 'desktop theatre' is a sub-genre which has ardent fans in several disciplines. Activism is yet another kind of social transaction well documented in the new annals of cyberculture, including not only feminists, but also ecologists, NGO's of all stripes, and political reformists. Many of the feminist texts focus on organizers, collectives and clusters of like minded users turning to digital technologies as a tool to support outreach endeavors. Issues concerning community per se and the cyber-enabled public sphere have been tackled by such diverse theorists as Sherry Turkle, Lisa Nakamura and Howard Rheingold, to name only a few. With the wide range of social engagements available to us online — grassroots protest, brand identification, role playing games, file swapping, identity construction, chat room encounters, shopping, research, photo archiving, email and fan productions, and the like — we are developing a set of tools which allow for multiple voices and positions, often importing them from previously unrelated disciplines.

Certainly there are many key authors whom I have left out here, but my goal is not to assemble a laundry list of canonical texts, but rather to indicate the wide variety of interpretive approaches which have already been identified as important to historians of cybercultures. However I do think that it might be useful to also acknowledge the limits which an historical approach produces. Can the knowledges contained in this canonical cataloguing even begin to achieve all the quality results we need for arriving at a useful perspective on the rise of cybercultures? Digital culture unfolds at a dizzying rate of

change, posing challenges to the authority of history. The manifestations of digital culture are apparently advancing geometrically, remember Moore's Law, while the critique about it appears to move more slowly, perhaps additively. As my previous brief survey of theory about cyberculture shows, the fundamental nature of the beast shifts before our very eyes and according to whomever is writing the history at hand. A game designer sees the history of digital culture in a very different way than does a grass roots activist in the jungle with limited access to either running water or electric power. Yet both may have a deeply engaged relationship to the burgeoning realm of digital culture – however that may be defined.

Finally, widening gaps in perception between generations and traditions further de-stabilize sincere efforts to pin new, convergent media neatly into place. What may seem like 'new media' to an older generation are now commonplace facts of life to more than one generation who has grown up completely surrounded by the digital, the cybernetic and the self-organizing. From the younger generation's standpoint, those born after say 1975, many of today's more quaint academic practices may occasionally appear as a virtual cargo-cult of fetishistic attachment to outdated methods. Nor are they necessarily 'wrong' to perceive it in that manner, despite many unresolved issues of originlity, authorship, durability, archival stability and the like. The matter can only be mentioned in passing within this limited context, but suffice it to say that a generational tension over what constitutes digital culture is clearly brewing under the surface, 'clearly' at least for those with the sensitivity to notice it. In the long run, it is imperative that the nature of what counts as the history of cyberculture not be essentialized or spoken for. There may well be resistances not yet appreciated or understood as occurring within an

historical context, and yet these resistances might be quite interesting for the gaps they point up in the current body of theory about what constitutes "new media", as so many still refer to it.

To quote again from the introduction to the Life by Design: Everyday Digital Culture symposium and exhibition, "While we strongly encourage the cultivation of a critical, and even skeptical, stance towards the technology we engage with on a daily basis, we find it is important to include not just theorists but also practitioners." As a virtual world builder, a person who explores the potentials and limits of self-expression in 3D virtual spaces shared in real time over the Internet, I am often aware that theorists tend to overlook the practical and the applied when writing about the virtual. As already noted, the term 'digital' serves as a bit of a catch all phrase and can apply to many phenomena: tools, texts, means, modes, representations – the list is long.

My own efforts focus on avatars and interactivity in the virtual, but first I would like to offer some definitions of terms, fleshing out some of the contested hot spots which infuse the discourse surrounding the virtual with passion. The virtual is here defined as a distinctly new type of public space which is digitally accessed by remote and distributed participants who may asynchronously engage in interpersonal and/or informational exchanges without the explicit permission of a centralized authority. Thus keywords for the virtual include remote, decentralized, asynchronous, participatory, unregulated exchange, public space, and digital or cybertechnologies.

Further, the virtual is characterized by contested claims to immateriality of at least two flavors, that is, the immaterial body and immaterial property. However, despite claims, critiques and literature to the contrary, the virtual is not a realm of unadulterated

immateriality but rather has imported to it multiple aspects of the originary material realm into its public space of exchange. Previously identified socio-political problems already linked to physical embodiment, such as the gendered or raced body, are frequently replicated in virtual space. As noted before, cyberfeminism has assembled an impressive critique of digital technologies, with a pointed argument against the historical elision of the masculine desire to both transcend the body and reject the immanent feminine Other. Additional categories of race and class also find familiar grounds to critique the escape mechanisms of Enlightenment era transcendence, a rejection of their alleged Otherness newly disguised in the discourse revolving around embodiment in cyberspace.

Resistances within the virtual emerge not only at the points of contestation between the material and immaterial realms of social hierarchy and the body, but also between material and immaterial (intellectual) property. Thus multinational corporate interests make vociferous legal claims about the protection of their property rights within a realm of virtual space which otherwise lends itself to free exchange of digitized and 'immaterial' files. Lawrence Lessig and Siva Vaidhyanathan explore these themes with great care in their books about intellectual property, copyright and freedom of expression. And the very material results of incarceration and unlimited search and seizure have been making themselves known as the Bush administration continues to make radical changes to the architecture of privacy in cyberspace for the world at large as it seeks cyber criminals and cyber terrorists under the aegis of the pro-American Patriot Act and the Total Awareness Information system. We should then ask, in this repressive environment of the virtual as enforceable habitat for less than free spirits, how does resistance play

out? Who gets to speak resistance in the virtual, and who is being ignored? Finally, does

the technology itself have any kind of a voice in these matters? Must it only be human

voices which articulate the virtual?

Voices which we do not usually hear from when discussing the virtual and its

proto-canon include all manner of everyday uses which seems to escape the radar of

critical assessment, undoubtedly for a wide variety of reasons. Michel de Certeau

explores the type of everyday resistances which slip in behind the scenes in his seminal

text, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a work which had no coincidental role in inspiring

this conference as well. Some of the voices of which I am thinking include the DJ and

hip hop master, the housewife and her electronic scrapbook, the funeral director who

orchestrates the online eulogy tributes by grieving family members and the bloggers who

negotiate and embroider threads of interconnection, acting as guest editors of the Web.

Included in this overlooked category is the utilization by ordinary people of software

programs in ways which often go far beyond their original intended uses – for example,

Photoshop in the hands of amateurs, and fan sites dedicated to the production of new

music, movies and objects for the Sims Family universes of cybersuburbia.

Authoring in the hands of the ordinary user is certain to feature in future histories

of cyberculture and digital technology, but currently some seem to resist the inclusion of

such popular culture and 'low-tech' self-expression within established disciplines such as

Film Studies or Comparative Literature at this allegedly early date. But is it early in fact?

For whom would it really be considered early? Certainly not to the ever-increasing

numbers of generations which have been using cybertechnologies, computers and digital

devices for their entire lives. If we ignore such low-tech, self-expressive and popular

culture practices, we run the risk of losing some important knowledges which may only appear to be out of place within the slower pace of diciplinary procedure. Perhaps the classed issue of whose voice gets to be heard as a legitimate maker of culture may well be a more entrenched problem than even the 'newness' of 'new media'. It remains to be seen.

To turn to a different example of everyday digital culture which remains under-theorized, I'd like to bring in avatars and gamers. Gamers have been using avatars for more than two decades now and yet it is still difficult to find texts which deal with the multiple topics engendered by avatars in anything but a 'first wave' voice. 'Avatar' comes from the ancient Sanskrit, meaning 'to cross down into', such as the animating force of a great spiritual being is said to cross down from the realm of the ethereal and to manifest itself on the material plane. Thus our avatars await our agency before coming to apparent life in the wide variety of 3D virtual spaces which we use them to inhabit. Such spaces include massively multi-player online role playing games (MMORPG's), virtual worlds, and arcade games, and perhaps by association, 2D textual environments such as MUD's, MOO's and chat spaces. Perhaps it is difficult for theorists to speak for an avatar when they have never created one, animated one or sought to find adequate alternatives from the palette of bipedal humanoids which tend to dominate three dimensional cyberspaces. It is almost, but not quite, needless to say that when theorists project ideas about the importance of cyberspace without a basis in actual practice, they run the risk of becoming increasingly isolated from the pulse of what is taking place within digital cultures. I perceive this to be a significant yet overlooked problem in a fair amount of theorization about the virtual.

The avatar, our principle means of psychologically entering the immaterial realm of virtual game play and cyberspace habitation, is a complex entity, replete with lore and history. Cyberhistorian Alluquere Rose Stone, among others, writes the well-known history about the hubris of the early programmers in the Silicon Valley who congratulated themselves as being 'as gods' when they invented the various aspects of video game interfaces and the first bulletin boards which later became the essence of the early Internet. Unknown to most theorists, however, is the history of how the 'recipe' for animating avatars in one popular browser was lost for a number of years when the design team at ActiveWorlds, Inc. walked out, taking their avatar knowledge with them. This story may at least partially explain why ActiveWorlds avatars can still be seen doing the Macarena, an animation tag from 1996 which is practically ancient history in the canon of online 3D browsers and virtual worlds, and why the closing scene of the animated feature Shrek also depicted 3D computer animated figures performing the dated classic. There are many, many features of an overdue avatar history and theory which remain to be explored, and I also can not help but wonder when the avatars themselves will finally undertake to give voice to their own history – an outcome that may not be nearly as distant or as fantastic as it sounds.

Despite previous statements that Life By Design: Everyday Digital Culture assumes that person to person interactivity is more important than the technology in and of itself, it is worth asking if this is a good assumption. Should a human computer interface (HCI) be the preferred definition of an interactive interface? In this psychological operation, the way the computer appears to respond to the input of the user creates an illusion of mutual engagement, perhaps even between equals. Indeed, this

quality of responsiveness to the user as an engineered feature of a program may even start to edge over into the territory of artificial intelligence (A.I.). Plenty of game designers refer quite casually to the imminent creation of 'character A.I.' in games, by which they mean that soon it will be difficult to discern human from non-human responses in emotional exchanges within the game context. Whether this could adequately qualify as a significant development of A.I. would be hotly contested, I believe, by researchers involved with robotic A.I. work. Even theorists who might arguably have greater flexibility for the term A.I., such as the artistically inclined Simon Penny, or the more consciousness-oriented team of Varela, Thompson and Rosch, would likely find this too weak a definition. Nonetheless, game design does continue to become increasingly sophisticated and able to simulate interactive engagement for the user, an engagement which perhaps questionably parallels the subtle interplay of emotion, narrative and character motivation of cinema. Aspirations towards the creation of artificial life or artificial intelligence are now being augmented by the creation of artificial emotion and emotion engines. Since so many designers posit that the holy grail of game design is the holographic incarnation of the Holodeck on Star Trek, we might just have to ask ourselves, whose history is this which we are describing?

Should we in fact describe and value non-humans, that is avatars, cyborgs, androids and robots, as teaching us how to be more human? Curiously, this is often the traditional role for art. It seems potentially problematic to raise the specter of old school humanism, a still very suspect, rejected and yet useful Enlightenment project which smacks of power relations and oppression, as a justification for the existence of non-human – what some call posthuman – technologies and entities. Combining this problem

with the earlier matter raised by the difficulty of theorizing without a basis in practice, and especially without a knowledge of resistant and everyday practices, perhaps we can begin to locate the crux of a virtual resistance. Let us ask how the virtual can gain an identity of its own, independent of humanist baggage imposed by the old school Enlightenment project on the one hand, and yet get a life based in analysis of actual practices without being a mere handmaiden, as photography once was for instance, to other disciplines which seek to mold digital cultures in their own images. This search for a resistent voice of virtual history strikes me as the basis for a balanced interdisciplinarity from which the study of digital cultures can benefit. It seems clear that only when digital cultures are empowered with their own resistant, situated and everyday voices, will we be able to get down to the exciting academic business of seeing what is truly unique about digital cybercultures and begin to write virtual history with some degree of the freshness and clarity which it demands

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