Building a Bridge to the Aesthetic Experience: Artistic Virtual Environments and Other Interactive Digital Art

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What is cyberspace? Like most important questions, the answer depends very much on whom you ask. Cyberspace seems to be highly mutable; it wears different guises for divergent questioners, depending very much on what type of glasses they are wearing. And the computer certainly qualifies as a strange kind of mirror -- the more deeply they skry its virtual depths, the more enthralled many theorists become by its digitized mutual gaze. So vast is the quantity of information available on the Internet that attempts to master the big picture cannot help but become highly self selecting. Yet most can agree that one of the standout characteristics of the new digital paradigm which fascinates theorists and practitioners alike is its apparent revolutionary character, its fundamental newness.

What I find interesting is what people do with the self expressive, creative opportunities in 3D virtual worlds -- or "artistic virtual environments" -- in a social, interpersonal way which has little to do with what people typically think of when they describe interactive digital media. I am not addressing the human computer interface or persistent environments, games and other interface driven spaces, which, to me, feel too burdened with prescribed behaviors. I like the free form opportunities which can be present in the less regimented worlds, places which tend to be viewed as the real backwaters of virtual technologies.

The common critique one usually hears about such worlds is similar to the Gertrude Stein remark about Oakland: there is no there, there. [1] Where I disagree is in the matter of criteria by which one makes such a judgment. By what aesthetic criteria does this conclusion come to apply to an entire class of cyber-spaces? I think that instead, plenty occurs there, but we are not necessarily attuned to see what it is. We lack the proper aesthetics that would allow us to actually observe something new.

The aesthetics which I propose can aid us to see something fresh are an 'aesthetics of play and empathy.' These terms have longstanding associations in a psychoanalytic context, as well as in other cultural contexts including art history, Buddhist studies, feminism and the post-colonial, among others. But before offering some concrete examples of these theoretical considerations, I want to offer some context and ground my discussion in the particulars of a two year experiment, an historical moment which functions as a kind of case study.

I began this work as a student as part of a virtual worlds theory and design team led by of Dr. Michael Heim at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. The team developed a pair of virtual worlds in the ActiveWorlds browser, although we explored other possibilities; this one suited our purposes best, being very easy to use and build in, even for persons with no previous programming skills, such as myself. During 2000 and 2001, we came to host a series of live, inworld author chats -- events we called the CyberForum - with a variety of digital theorists, initially drawn from the contributors of Peter Lunenfeld's seminal book, *The Digital Dialectic*. [2] Guests included William T. Mitchell, Brenda Laurel, Kate Hayles and perhaps a dozen more. [3] Attendees included students located together in the computer lab, with other participants located remotely -- including Heim, who 'telecommuted' from home on these occasions. Many regulars who made time to participate were joining us

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from such diverse locations as England, Sweden, Italy, Denmark, India and other parts of the US. Timing was often a challenge for such global gatherings, and only committed night owls joined us from the Pacific regions.

A number of these participants, notably Mikael Jakobsson in Malmo Sweden and Art Center faculty members Simon Niedenthal and Tom Mancuso, also helped to build the world, a long-term and complex

undertaking that was done both collaboratively and asynchronously -- as a team, and as individual efforts by students. The building of the worlds themselves became a very important part of the process, and partially led to my emphasis on an aesthetics of play. First, it often required more than one person to build correctly as multiple POV's were beneficial to object placement, and secondly, as every architect knows, the type of spaces available in any environment have a critical impact on the types of behavior which take place there. [Fig. 1]
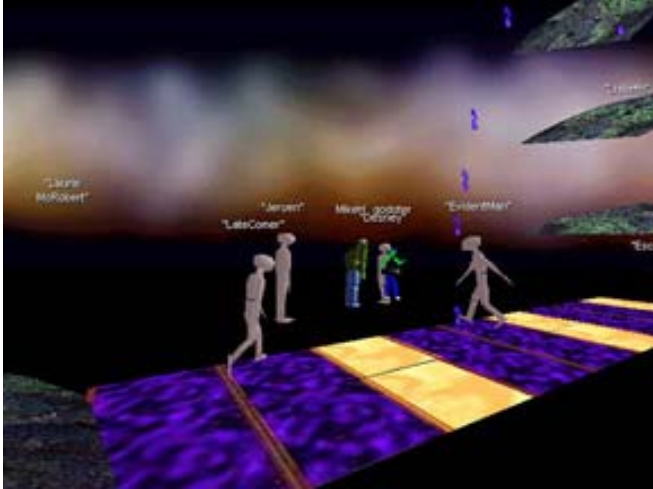

Fig. 1: Architecture determines uses by avatars -- a path leading to a new speaking point

Very early on, Heim and the team rejected the use of realism as a governing criterion for the types of objects, avatars and environmental concerns which they wanted to explore. Despite some concerns about 'user friendliness,' the team felt from the outset that guests would be able to find their way without the usual cues, and indeed, many first time world visitors experienced no difficulty navigating the distinctive ACCD environments. The worlds had no gravity, no ground, few humanoid avatars, virtually no photorealism, no text and a very atypical entry at ground zero. [Fig. 2] These choices accommodate more flying, more exploring, more multi-level structures, greater access for novice builders, more visually engaging abstraction and provide an entry for the symbolic. The new aesthetic pioneered by Heim and the ACCD team proffered a general atmosphere which favors artistic and performative choices, all to great interactive and social effect. The ACCD worlds explored the possibilities of social architecture in virtual environments by rejecting the standard conventions and formal concerns that are not required in the immateriality of cyberspace.

In keeping with the formal changes and the rejection of conventions more typical of realist spaces, Heim and the team developed behaviors and strategies for interacting with guests within the virtual worlds, emphasizing among ourselves that the spaces should not be

merely very decorative chat rooms. Evolving out of the very first CyberForum which included a key encounter between Peter Lunenfeld and a regular Danish participant known only as 'skejs,' Mike Heim developed the notion of a reverse memory palace, a series of locations which function as talking points or 'topoi' and which the team further layered with what came to be called 'avatar rituals.' [4] This was a deliberate exploration of the 3D embodiment which such environments provide -- not at the direction of game play, but rather arising from creative self expression, free-form play and a search for a sense of larger purpose for these virtual spaces.

Many of the rituals were pre-planned, but quite a number arose spontaneously. Sometimes speakers -- or guests -- derailed our plans, and other things happened instead. The CyberForum events were the quintessential hybrid: a series of controlled chaos experiments with a strong sense of direction, walking the edge between party, classroom and literary salon. One often hears about the de-centralized virtues of the distributed authority provided by the web as a model of shared power, and nowhere could this be more evident than these CyberForum sessions, attended by students, the occasional heckler, international academics and some truly great theorists and practitioners of digital media. My proposal of an 'aesthetics of play' is intended -- in part - to encompass a phenomenon like this series of author chats, though it has many other aspects as well.

One notable avatar ritual which left a lasting mark occurred in an unplanned and very accidental way. My 'Pinkie' avatar was not always so uniform. [Fig. 3] and she used to have some very interesting waiting behaviors and a lot of limitations which turned out to be quite fun. Certain dance tags would literally have Pinkie fly apart in different directions -- the top one way, the bottom another. We ended up discovering the 'Pinkie
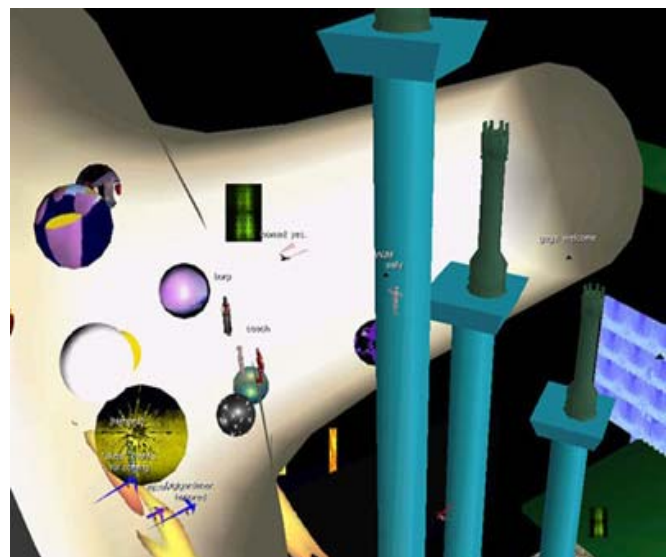

Fig. 2:An unusual ground zero creates a new experience for visitors

dance', as guest speaker Niranjan Rajah called it, in which the playful effort at trying to switch tops and bottoms produced in the users an uncanny sense of being there and created a genuine visceral memory of presence in this cyber-space and avatar incarnation. [5] As we discovered, not only did this cross-identification of avatars fulfill one of our stated goals -- the effort to move beyond chat and into some sort of actual usefulness for 3D virtuality beyond or besides game play in the standard sense -- but it also leads to an increase in empathy, with some interesting implications.

The development of an aesthetic of empathy arises most easily in world with a limited choice of avatars, and with a minimum of text. Browser features may change, but the principle remains the same, that one may often be uncertain which avatar is yours in a crowd. This sense of identity conflation with others, or even the sense that a subject melds into a distributed group identity, offers a potential for an amplification of empathy, which in turn points up some foundational social operations at the heart of these interactive spaces.

Play and empathy are already understood as basic operations in the formation of identity in developing children. [6] As we attempt to shift our consciousness into the new dimension of cyberspace, we come to realize we need new ground rules for harmonious socialization in a realm which simply does not adhere to the same rules as our own. Rather than assume that the more realistic a simulation of our existing reality we can import into virtual spaces the better, it makes sense to explore such spaces for what they are -- to develop a phenomenology of 3D virtual spaces, as Heim has explored in his numerous books. [7] As is well known by students of art history, artistic explorations are a powerful way to push the boundaries of what we can do if we truly invest in the tools and limitations which are present, or returning to Stein, to acknowledge what is "there there," instead of imposing values inherited from other media.

This aesthetic foundation of play and empathy allows us to return to the theoretical considerations I mentioned at the beginning, but with a fresh and practical appreciation of what it means to be engaged in an artistic social process, one that is inclusive, distributed and values the subjective. In art-historical terms, one can think of Joseph Beuys and his 'social sculptures' as an interesting counterpoint. In psychoanalytic terms, the theorization of object relations and its applications to literature bring up the work of Donald Winnicott, Christopher Bollas and Gabriel Schwab, thinkers who posit the transitional object and transitional space as crucial to the formulation of an emerging subjectivity. In feminist terms, the resistance of an essentialized or ventriloquized subject allows us to reconsider the categories of the user and the avatar,

both of which have been neglected as specific entities with issues of their own. And in postcolonial terms, as Florian Roetzer points out, the imperialist model of most virtual spaces has yet to be re-invented from a colonizing and territorial gesture which as he puts it, simply re-inscribes cyberspace as an American policy. [8] These are just a few examples of the kind of theoretical explorations that an aesthetics of play and empathy allows us to open up in consideration of artistic virtual environments. [9]

As another example, this type of theorization of 3D virtual worlds allows us to re-consider key issues such as the nature of authorship. As I see it, the sense of pleasure or flow that arises in play is often related to problem solving and pattern detection -- most recognizable in the so-called fan productions, which are rife in such 3D virtual worlds. [10] Fan productions are often dismissed, when they are in fact crucial to the economy of play that characterizes such interactive spaces. An adherence to rigid aesthetic and strictly formal concerns can prevent one from seeing the merits of such fan productions, instead seeing them as mere imitation, or purely derivative -- all of which misses the point completely. Allowing for an expanded definition of authorship, which flows with perfect ease from any number of theoretical considerations whether it is Roland Barthes' death of the author, a feminist critique of authority or, as I suggest, an aesthetics of play and

Fig. 3: The Pinkie Dance - Pinkie avatars try to exchange tops and bottoms
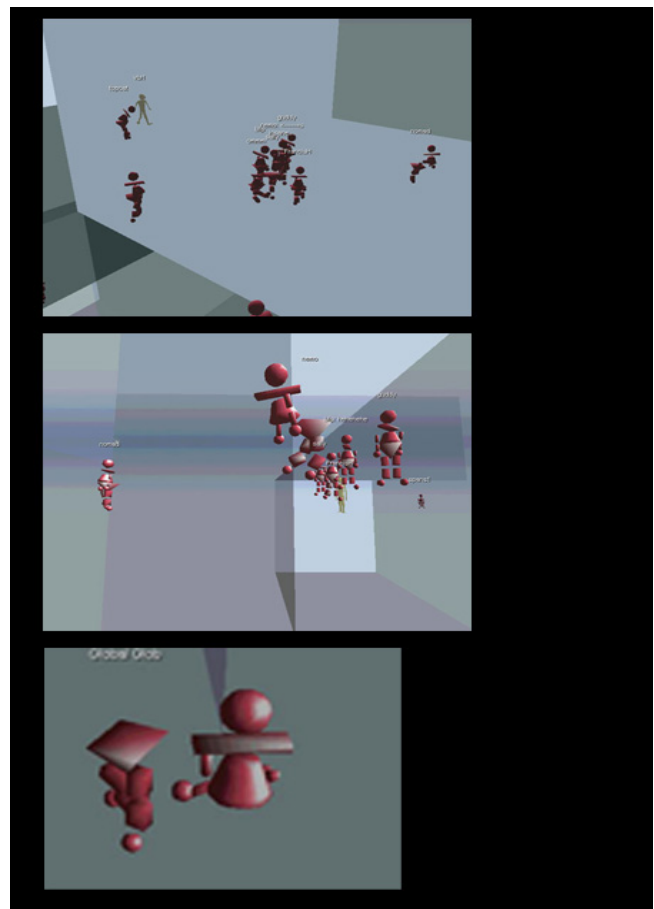
empathy, allows us to embrace the creativity and ponder the potential subversion of the status quo which such fan productions suggest.

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While play opportunity is not yet fully recognized as an aesthetic criterion, some scholarship points the way to understanding the importance of creative, popular and subversive trifling with the status quo. Anthropologist Victor Turner, literary and historical theorists such as Johann Huizinga and Mikhail Bakhtin, critical theorist Michel de Certeau, and the contemporary work of Michael Heim all point to opportunities for a fresh examination of the role which play can have in assessing the merits of a 3D virtual world. Critical theory tools which re-examine the subject, notions of authority and authorship, and which question the traditional balance of power and models for community allow us to open up the practice of creating 3D virtual worlds in directions which are firstly appropriate to interactive media and which secondly advance agendas already well established in the fine art world. As so many have said before, it is not the technology but the content which makes for compelling user experiences. Yet it cannot be emphasized enough that this content must be supported by the environment in which it is embodied. An aesthetics of play and empathy for virtual worlds attempts to reconcile experience, subjectivity and pleasure as a dynamic social process in dialogue with the traditional fine art discourse. As such, the vocabulary is wide open and waiting to be explored.

This paper and its title are drawn from a presentation commissioned by Dena Elisabeth Eber for a session of the same name at Siggraph 2004, 31st International Conference on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques, Los Angeles Convention Center, Los Angeles, August 9, 2004. Due to space limitations, only a portion of the topics can be covered here.

Images courtesy Michael Heim and/or Tobey Crockett

References:

[1] Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Exact Change: Berkely, CA, 1993; first publ. 1937). Stein's famous quote about her birthplace is, "The trouble with Oakland is that when you get there, there isn't any there there."

[2] Peter Lunenfeld, *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2000)

[3] The CyberForum archives can be found at Michael Heim's website, http://www.mheim.com/cyberforum/

[4] Michael Heim's "New Memory Palace" chat log can be found in greater detail at http://www.mheim.com/cyberforum/html/spring2000/media/heim/log2.html

[5] The chat log from Naranjan Rajah's talk is part of the CyberForum's "The Avatar and the Global Brain" series. The log can be accessed at http://www.mheim.com/cyberforum/html/summer2000/log-S3.html

[6] See Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge Books: Oxford, UK, 1982) for a good overview of the roles of play and empathy in childhood development.

[7] Michael Heim is the author of several important books that address the intersection of philosophy and the virtual. *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1987), *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1994) and *Virtual Realism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1998) are all excellent reads which adopt a "middle path" between technophilia and critique.

[8] Florian Roetzer, "Outer Space or Virtual Space? Utopias of the Digital Age" in John Beckmann (ed.), *The Virtual Dimension: Architecture, Representation, and Crash Culture* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 1998), pp. 120 - 143

[9] These and related topics are addressed more thoroughly in my doctoral dissertation, a work in progress at the University of California, Irvine, in the PhD Program in Visual Studies (estimated completion date June, 2006). My working title is "Towards A Theory of Fun: Aesthetics of Play and Empathy in 3D Virtual Worlds." See www.tobeycrockett.com for more information about my work.

[10] Pleasure or flow is indebted to the work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, while an economy of fan productions discussion has been advanced by Will Wright, among many others. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco, 1975). See Celia Pearce's interview with Will Wright: Celia Pearce, "Sims, BattleBots, Cellular Automata God and Go" in *Games Studies 2.1* (2002), gamestudies.org/0102/pearce