Chapter XVIII

Fuzzy Boundaries, Strange Negotiations: Problems of Space, Place and Identity in Cyberspace

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INTRODUCTION

In cyberspace, hundreds of thousands, perhaps already millions, of users create online personae who live in a diverse group of virtual communities where the routine formation of multiple identities undermines any notion of a real and unitary self. Yet the notion of the real fights back. People who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by desires, pain and the mortality of their physical selves.

S. Turkle

In all this talk of the virtual world it is easy to forget that someone has to do the wiring.

R. X. Cringley
Nerds 2.0.1–A Brief History of the Internet, 1999
In 1997, attempting to focus attention on the imploding boundaries between organism and machine Mizuko Ito wrote about multi-user dungeons (MUDs). These are communities where people who have created online personae come together as a virtual community and act out roles in ways that they imagine this person would. Whilst others have extolled the virtualness of these online worlds (Benedikt, 1991; Heim, 1991; Rheingold, 1995), Ito showed us that there are other ways of seeing that reveal these worlds as a “complex interaction between a network of various ‘real world’ material technologies as well as the cultural capital of its users and designers” (Ito 1997, p. 91). Whilst much of Turkle’s (1996) book focuses on life beyond the screen and people’s behavior in what many see as the virtuality of cyberspace, towards the end of the book, she hints that there is a physical world that these “cyberplayers” are bound to and will ultimately die in (1996). In a rather more pragmatic vein, Cringley reminds us that someone has to do the wiring, that there is a complex material technology beneath all this. It is this interplay between the virtual and material technologies that I wish to explore here.

When writing about the multiplicity of identity and the virtuality of cyberspace many authors examine MUDs (Benedikt, 1991; Rheingold, 1995; Bromberg, 1996; Turkle, 1996; Ito, 1997). The ways in which people construct characters and roles within these worlds that are often overseen and controlled by a hierarchy of wizards who, as they gain more experience and move further away from the players’ world, become gods and attain “near absolute power to implement decisions on their MUDs” (Ito, 1997, p. 90). In my attempt to display the way the boundaries between the physical and non-physical are collapsing I wish to take something a little more prosaic than an online community and far more ubiquitous. It is something that an estimated 50 million people have, it is used for business, for pleasure, for profit, to maintain contact with friends and loved ones, for intimacy and slander—that is the e-mail address.

In what follows, I show that the e-mail address is often the result of negotiations between humans and nonhumans, that it points to spaces where texts are held, that it can be used to deliberately conceal identity or it can result in an owner’s identity being altered with their grudging acceptance. Much of the evidence I use to support my argument is the result of far more extensive work being undertaken into the role of the Internet in libraries, in particular at the State Library of Victoria (SLV) which has a number of public access Internet (PAI) computers (Wenn, 1999; 2000). I have also drawn on my own experiences as an e-mail user and onetime systems administrator as well as those of friends and colleagues who were kind enough to share their experiences with me. My method of presentation is multi-vocal in that it makes use
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