

Avatars R Us?

Discourses of Community and Embodiment in Intercultural Cyberspace

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Abstract

This paper examines the recent emergence of visions of globalised virtual communities who inhabit graphical versions of cyberspace implemented on the Internet. Often it is claimed that geography, nationality, 'race' and gender (are) no longer matter in these novel domains. In regard to the contemporary debates over the nature of intercultural communication, the paper considers how human communication is envisaged in these so-called transcultural 'virtual communities', whether the pervasive troubles of 'off-line' intercultural communication are really transcended 'online', and how participants shape their talk and language use to constitute their virtual intercultural encounters. Lastly, the role of graphical avatar embodiments for participants who communicate a 'virtual ethnicity' to others is analysed in a particular setting. The focus is on our changing conceptions and practices of, as well as relations between identity, community and embodiment in intercultural cyberspace.

Keywords: transcultural "virtual communication", inhabited virtual worlds, notions of computable community, graphical versions of cyberspace, ideological technologies.

Introduction

This paper examines the recent emergence of visions of globalised virtual communities who inhabit versions of 'cyberspace' implemented on the Internet. In the last decade a number of supposedly universally accessible computer-generated worlds have been developed and then 'inhabited' by geographically dispersed computer users who can communicate and animate a virtual graphical presence, as avatars, to others in the environment. Often it is claimed that geography, nationality, 'race' and gender (are) no longer matter in these novel domains. In regard to the contemporary debates over the nature of intercultural communication, key questions immediately arise. How is human communication envisaged in these so-called transcultural 'virtual communities'? Are the pervasive troubles of 'off-line' intercultural communication really transcended 'online'? How do participants shape their talk and language use to constitute their virtual intercultural encounters? What role does the graphical avatar embodiment play for participants who communicate a 'virtual ethnicity' to others?

To try to address these important questions, I focus on *our changing conceptions and practices of, as well as relations between, community and embodiment in intercultural cyberspace*. Much has been written recently on the nature of computer-mediated communication and the virtual community, (1) but as yet there are few practical studies of ethnicity and situated virtual intercultural communication in avatar worlds. (2) In the first part of the paper, I examine some of the discourses of the virtual community that are now circulating, especially as they relate to the commodification of community. In the second part, I connect them to issues of embodiment and identity by analysing a fragment of 'intercultural' social interaction that took place in inhabited cyberspace. The main thrust of the paper is that new communication technologies are reshaping our conceptions and practices of communication, community and culture. Consequently, how we communicate our cultural identities and form our identifications in and through new technologies, as well as how we encounter virtual 'others', needs careful investigation.

To draw the reader's attention to the often unnoticed but crucial impact of communication technologies on how we conceive of intercultural communication, let us compare two recent examples. The two images (3) discussed promote a transcendent vision of intercultural communication and community to be achieved with the aid of social technologies. First, let us look at how a new variant — the mobile phone — of an older virtual communications technology — the telephone (4) — is marketed. The particular Mobilix advertisement that is discussed here first appeared in the Danish press and on billboards in the early Spring of 1998. Three Danish words "Samtale fremmer forståelsen" ["Dialogue promotes

understanding"] bridge the starkly contrasted images of two women separated by an abyss of white space. The woman on the left is white and stereotypically Nordic; she wears sunglasses. The woman of colour on the right wears a veil required for a devout Muslim woman; only her eyes are visible. Both stare out of the advert at the viewer; not at each other. For a reader, this advert may conjure up the binary distinction between the West and the East, between native and immigrant woman, between emancipation and oppression, between freedom of expression and censorship, between Christianity and Islam, played out through the contrast between the women's appearances, dress, and fashion. It is the product of one of those Benetton-inspired advertising campaigns that are ambivalently inserted virus-like into contemporary social debates on, for example, immigration, religion, gender and discrimination. The advert, which is one in a series, promotes *the salvation narrative that a value-free communications technology can provide the means to overcome deep social and cultural divisions*. It also reinforces *the false assumption that troubles in intercultural encounters are a matter of communicative misunderstanding between two distinct, homogenous cultures*.

Compare that advert to the following simulacrum of the intercultural. The second image was created by Roger Zuidema for the book *Avatars!* (Damer 1998) and is called 'Avabar scene', a composite of avatars from the many different virtual worlds that have been implemented. The avatars include an Inuit, a clown, a bride and groom, animals and fictional characters. Many face us as if standing to attention, expectant of our interest and gaze. The Inuit man seems to welcome us with open arms. All are gathered in 'avaface-to-avaface' presence in a 3-D environment that resembles a large hall with a bar and dance floor. It is a bounded public space, a supposedly egalitarian, neutral place, where people meet, chat, socialise and make friends. However, since none of the software required to 'inhabit' the different worlds yet have provision for avatars to transfer with integrity between worlds, such a 'gathering of the tribes' in the new virtual 'global village' is not currently possible.

What then are we to make of this second fantasy image? Does it signify an ecumenical vision of a global community to be realised through us 'inhabiting' new communications technologies? Of course, one driving force behind this convergence dream is to make virtual worlds exploitable for commercial gain. Others argue that we can escape into a brave new global village of egalitarian communication and community, such that we transcend the shackles of the physical body and its cultural codes, as well as communicate without cultural barriers. But are we so free to construct life in a transcultural digital world? What does it mean to say one 'inhabits' a virtual world? Who gets to 'inhabit' and how is communication between the virtual participants — who are *physically* and *materially* located somewhere else in geographical, social and cultural space — 'locally' organised? Given that these digital virtual environments often support a strong sense of sociality and community despite their crudeness, and that they are created and maintained in and through interactional, semiotic and linguistic practices, and that they are likely to have a profound effect on society and (inter)cultural practices, then we need to study them critically and prudently, yet with an engaging curiosity.

History and background to inhabited virtual worlds

In this section I give a short background introduction to inhabited virtual worlds. Since the late 1980s, a number of supposedly universally accessible 2-D and 3-D avatar worlds have been developed and then 'inhabited' simultaneously by geographically dispersed computer users. Depending on one's definition, the technological precursors to the graphic virtual communities of the 1990s include speech, written correspondence, the telephone, bulletin board systems, e-mail and multi-party online chat rooms. Sandy Stone (1991: 85) claims that virtual space is "an imaginary locus of interaction created by communal agreement." She argues that they are incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'. Users may belong to different local, regional or other territory-bound 'speech communities' and cultures, but 'online' they can 'meet' and communicate in mediated text or speech (5) and animate a virtual graphical presence to others in their digitally-created environment. Indeed, these new social technologies have made it easier for intercultural encounters to take place, though they have not always provided adequate resources for resolving communicative conflicts or misunderstandings. I am collecting ethnographic and interactional data from several of these virtual worlds, and my corpus of data materials includes video recordings of naturally occurring activities in public spaces and gatherings, pictures of scenes, log files of online communication, web sites, newsgroups, and mailing lists.

Poster (1995) argues that with digitalisation we are entering a second media age comparable to the first media age when printing was developed in the West. For Poster (1998: 194), virtuality represents an occasion for the articulation of new figures of ethnicity, nationhood, community and global interaction. Pierre Lévy (1998) argues that the virtual must be understood as an historical articulation of the real, fully as actual as any other such articulation, but one connected specifically with computer-mediated communication technologies. He argues that the actual is increasingly becoming virtualised and this can be a positive force for social change. Kramarae (1998: 118) insists, however, that if we "define community as including interpersonal interaction, economic interdependency, sharing of social life, including sickness, health, spiritual concerns, we don't see many of these in cyberspace."

Science fiction continues to dominate the aesthetic of writing about virtuality and cyberspace. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) are credited with inspiring many software designers to create comparable virtual worlds. However, little attention is paid to the impact of cyberspace technologies on individuals and communities engaged in living everyday life (Hamilton 1997). To get a better perspective on the Internet, Kramarae (1998: 112) recommends we examine the past: "the predictions of radically better communication or universal community for 'everyone' were made for the uses of telephone, ham radio, community cable TV, CB radio. In actuality, in each case the costs of 'belonging' remained substantial for many, and those without the expensive equipment and knowledge to use it were usually omitted from the many decision-making processes that determine what can be done and at what expense by whom." Corroborating Kramarae's point, Schroeder (1996) points out that, contrary to the utopian view, virtual worlds are socially stratified in all sorts of ways.

This raises the issue of virtual interculturality. Mark Poster (1998: 186) uses the term 'virtual ethnicity' and asks "Is virtual ethnicity an alternative to the binaries of particularism and universalism, parochialism, and cosmopolitanism, inserting itself between nations and communities, earthly ethnicities and races?" Poster calls for a study of how identities associated with the body, such as gender and ethnicity, are configured in these virtual 'places'. *How are these genders and ethnicities different from and similar to those on television shows, telephone conversations, synchronous meetings, serendipitous urban encounters and massed refugee camps?* I attempt to deal with some of the issues he raises by examining avatar virtual worlds. In the next section, I analyse *how a particular conception of virtual community is being promoted that neatly side-steps the complex issues of difference and identity in intercultural communication.*

Colonising and commodifying notions of community

One of the more common discourses of 'virtual community' can be seen from the following publications. The title of Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Virtual Frontier* (1993) and the front cover text of Shelton & McNeely's *Virtual Communities Companion* (1997), which claims it is "your passport to the bold new frontier of cyberspace", give us the now familiar metaphor of the frontier, a virtual territory to be colonised. (6) But it is books such as Shelton & McNeely's and Powers' *How to Program Virtual Communities* (1997) which concern me most here, because they promote a particular vision of social technologies. According to Powers (1997), his book "is the first comprehensive book that reveals the history, building blocks and design principles for building and managing a virtual community. It is a hands-on guide to the construction of livable virtual communities using affordable software available today." Associated with the latter two publications are software and advocacy companies, such as Electric Communities and Awakening Technology, who propose 'design' configurations for effectively supporting virtual communities.

In order to provide a more critical commentary on these social computing projects, I examine the rush to colonise and commodify notions of community. One way to think of these developments is that they signal the contemporary turn towards *community as data*, or *computable community* — another colonisation of human social activity, along with the subjection of the physical body to the intimate surveillance required for immersive virtual reality, that subtly realigns power/knowledge and bio-power (Foucault 1976, 1980). It is becoming clear that multinational corporations and companies have a stake in massaging and generating sociality and the modern subject for their own purposes, which means extending their reach from internal company policy out into the practices and discourses of politics, culture, society and the 'warm' community in the civil sphere. (7) And, of course, a key domain is that of

culture, especially the intercultural, that elusive space in which the worker must now learn to cope with 'others' and their 'differences', both within and outside the corporation.

Much as science fiction often tells us more about contemporary social issues and dilemmas, so the bland futurism of marketing tells us much about the present, rather provocative concerns of private business corporations and commerce. For instance, advisory companies such as the Doblin Group, state on their web-site that:

we ground our investigations of cultural change in people's everyday activities, rather than with demographic twitches or purchase patterns. With tools and teams borrowed from academic social science, we seek to put broad change in context.

<<http://www.doblin.com/what/distill.html>>

It is not often stated so explicitly that multinational companies wish to utilise the theories, models and findings of the social and human sciences to effect change not only in the company but in the society outside; in fact, the tendency now is to regard the boundaries between work and home, public and private, private and civil sector, employee and citizen as more fluid and manipulable.

It is insightful to compare competing discourses of cultural identity and community across the web sites of client companies, software development houses, educators, support services and conferences. We find *salvation narratives of transcendent social communities and an abiding preoccupation with the reconstitution of homogenised identities, combined with a blinkered view of the nature of communication.* For instance, let us consider software design companies such as Electric Communities and Worlds Inc.. Electric Communities claims that:

real communities don't develop from isolated chat sessions, but from bonds that form as people share experiences, build trust, and express themselves fully.

<<http://www.communities.com/community/index.html>>

Themes of transcendence repeat themselves across the hype of virtual communities and virtual reality, as we can see from the following proselytising statement from Worlds Inc, one of the first companies to build 3-D worlds:

Internet chat has exploded into a new communications medium with virtual 3D places where people from around the world meet to talk.... Imagine yourself walking down a lush garden path, in rapt conversation with a friend, where the only sounds are the chirping of birds overhead and the crunch of pine needles underfoot. Or instead, think about traipsing along meeting other people like yourself, until the urge hits and you simple spread your arms and fly off into an infinite, azure sky....Once you're there, you can meet all kinds of people, from all kinds of places in every corner of the real world. <<http://www.worlds.net/wc/index.html>>

Many books are being published to capitalise on the design and day-to-day running of profitable online communities. In chapter 15 of Shelton & McNeely's *Designing Virtual Communities* (1997), they let their imaginations run riot:

Imagine if the denizens of cyberspace all banded together, held a bloodless revolution, and declared the Internet a separate and sovereign state, independent of regulatory control by any one nation or cabal of nations. The Internet could have its own political leaders, its own economy, and its own way of dealing with conflict. I (only partly jokingly) propose we name our new nation The United Peoples of Cyberia. There are no physical issues, and our citizens would enjoy dual citizenship of both cyberspace (with all the rights and responsibilities that would entail) and whatever meatspace nation they originally hail from (442).

To be able to communicate is to be empowered. For those of us lucky enough to be among the mere 40 million currently online, the ability to participate in communities that ignore political boundaries and geographic limits is tremendously powerful (444).

It is often claimed that emergent 'lifestyle' communities that escape the 'troubles' and aporias of gender, 'race', ethnicity and the corporeal body are socially desirable and technologically feasible in cyberspace. In contrast, Stratton (1997: 271) argues that "the American mythologization of the Internet as a community represents a nostalgic dream for a mythical early modern community which reasserts the dominance of the white, middle-class male and his cultural assumptions... located in the melting-pot politics of homogenization into a new, unitary American national identity."

In an article on 'Shared Spaces' in the *British Telecommunication Engineering* magazine of July 1996, the authors play with the metaphors of the frontier and surfing:

Shared Spaces turn surfers into settlers.... If we combine Shared Spaces with an emphasis on participant authoring we will get network settlers — people putting a permanent, persistent presence of themselves on the network. They will start to put down roots and develop relationships in the network. The new Wild West is on the Internet and the indigenous surfers are being joined by settlers. <http://virtualbusiness.labs.bt.com/msss/IBTE_SS/>

They come clean with their pursuit of better models of customer/user surveillance when they suggest that

Shared Spaces present interesting opportunities in charging models... The existence of stable communities provides greater scope to segment the advertising market. Moreover, in a Shared Space we can know where someone has looked. We can put adverts in the distance and bill the advertiser based on how close the customer gets to the advert. <ibid.>

Nevertheless, the older customer and client/consumer models are being discarded in favour of a realigning of roles and duties in commerce. For example, the *VirComm 98 Conference on Business-Based Virtual Communities* held in February 1998, to promote the commercialisation of virtual communities, tells us that if one attends

You will learn how successful communities build a unique, intangible relationship with their members or customers — offering a special 'something' that invites long visits and return traffic, turning their customers into partners — and at the same time creating a positive direct or indirect cash flow. <<http://www.online.com/vircomm/vircomm98/sessions.html>>

Customers have been transformed into "members" or "partners" in this new discourse of virtual communities for profit. In the *Digital Communities Bicoastal Symposium*, November 1998, we learn from the blurb on a session entitled 'Digital Communities as Key Business Strategy' that:

this session will introduce attendees to the growing business requirement to incorporate digital community development into overall corporate strategy. <<http://www.techreview.com/agenda.htm>>

In his pseudo-article 'Visions of Avatar Cyberspace: The Internet in 2001, Way Beyond the Web', Bruce Damer knows that what appeals to business in a post-Fordist society is the image of the cyborg in the virtual workplace: "the power worker will exist in many places at once" and management will be able to

deal with your avatar attendees and physical presences at the same time. Fly at high speed through every department and cubicle in the organisation. <<http://www.digitalspace.com/avatars/book/intro/preface.htm>>

These extracts tell us something is happening to our sense of community — it is being digitalised and virtualised, made computable yet deterritorialised. The business sector is commercialising the Internet, concerned with more profitable ways of controlling and structuring the market. *Community is now both the site and stake in struggles over the meaning and value of human contact, communication and culture.* Moreover, the messy issues of intercultural communication in an increasingly globalised, but unequal world are circumvented by positing a unifying cyberspace, in which it is assumed that the common language of the new virtual worker is English, and one can be and do anything one desires.

Data Example: Avatars R not quite us!

The quotations in the previous section illustrate some of the common narratives and discourses of virtual community that are in circulation. The constructed scenarios are designed to demonstrate the transformative potential of the social technology of virtual worlds, yet they are insipid and narrow, merely supporting the vision of corporate public relations. Now, let us turn to the practical issue of how people construct their virtual embodiment and intercultural encounters online. I only have space for one example to illustrate that all is not as envisaged.

In virtual worlds, one is embodied as a graphic animation, so particular tools are required to investigate how this embodiment in virtual space shapes one's identity, one's social interactions, and one's intercultural encounters with others similarly embodied. Poster (1998: 196) reminds us that we should recognise and account for the "mediations within face-to-face communities, the way they are technologies of power that constitute subjects and their ethnic identities through material, symbolic practices." Conversation and interaction analysis furnish us with suitable empirical methods for examining the minutiae of situated technology-mediated interactional and communicative practices (Jordan & Henderson 1995), and help us attend to how specific figures of ethnicity are translated, altered or transformed in particular ways in virtual spaces.

The example is transcribed from a video-recording of an 'avaface-to-avaface' encounter between two participants in a virtual world. They are geographically dispersed, but their avatars are 'co-present' somewhere in the Active Worlds universe. (8) A is embodied as the avatar-type called Sabrina, B is embodied as Dredd. (9) They have recently met and are in A's virtual home, touring the rooms that A has built. The transcript simply records the text messages that appeared consecutively in the chat window of the client software (each text message sent to the other participant was also temporarily displayed above the head of the avatar who 'spoke'). However, the equals sign (=) placed before two messages by different participants (eg. lines 3 and 4) gives some indication of the temporality of message reception that is often significant for the interaction. (10)

Data Example

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1 A: just curious are you black?
2 B: hah
3 =B: cause im a dredd
4 =A: what?
5 A: Yes
6 B: dredd avie
7 A: yes
8 A: are you?
9 =A: no big deal
10 =B: does it matter?
11 B: ok
12 B: nope
13 A: ok
14 B: r u?
15 A: No
16 A: I am 100% Irish
17 B: and proud of it?
18 A: I guess
19 =B: im a half irish :-)
20 =A: never really thought of that
21 A: cool

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In line 1, A asks a direct question about B's 'racial' self-identification, making relevant 'race talk', but carefully aligning her/himself innocuously — "just curious" — to the social import of the question. Given that they — or their avatars — are visible to each other in 3-D virtual space, the question may look

puzzling at first. B's immediate response is to type "hah", a common laughter token, yet clearly a trouble source for A, who initiates repair with a next-turn repair initiator in line 4. Almost in overlap, B makes a suggestion (line 3) as to what may have generated the curiosity, what motivates the question beyond the "just curious"; namely, a prior noticing that she/he is virtually embodied as the Dredd avatar, which is a system-provided avatar (colloquially known as an 'avie' or 'av') and a name suggestive of *dreadlocked*, dark-skinned features.

Following a brief sequential asynchrony, A displays agreement with B's account in line 7. Thus, the participants have oriented to the inferences one can make about the cultural identities of others from their embodiments. In line 8, A asks the question again, thus treating the prior talk as an insertion sequence, and pursuing a relevant answer. In lines 9 and 10, both participants orient almost simultaneously to the force of that reassertion: that it may be taken as not innocent, eg. that it is racially motivated. They resolve that giving an answer to this 'yes/no' question will not provide grounds for substantive action by A. B answers no, then B asks the same question of A, to which A answers no. At this point, it becomes evident that neither A nor B are choosing avatars that reflect their offline ethnic identities. This is not uncommon since, as Nakamura (1995) points out, we see the rise of *identity tourism* online: *a dream of crossing over racial boundaries temporarily and recreationally with no risks associated with being a racial minority in real life*.

Next in the conversation, A declares in line 16 that "I am 100% Irish", an elaboration of her/his answer that positively ascribes to her/himself a pure ethnic identity category which is hearable as comparable to, yet distinct from, "black" as part of the membership collection 'race'. (11) Thus, we can reason that to be 100% Irish is not to be black, racially untainted by a drop of black blood. (12) A and B negotiate their situated perspective on 'race' while doing alignment, but they do so at this moment by drawing upon a hierarchy of realities: one's ontological status is grounded in identifications in the offline physical world. A's question "are you black?" is understood as "are you *really* black in the offline world?" Later, B's response in line 17 asks for clarification of A's alignment to her/his own prior statement. B reformulates A's prior turn by probing, possibly recontextualising it as a boast, to which A responds with ambivalence.

Nakamura (1995) observes that "some forms of racial passing are condoned and practised since they do not threaten the integrity of a national sense of self which is defined as white." The dialogue in the extract above is indicative of the presumptive accountability of participants to their choice of embodiment *when* they have 'chosen' a non-dominant form or feature that becomes 'noticeable'. In fact, *it is through these noticings and categorisation practices that parties attempt to (re)construct the relations between the centre and the margins while embodied in the virtual domain*. White is still invisible, non-white is accountable. (13) In addition, one can be accountable to the authenticity of taking on that embodiment in relation to one's 'real life' cultural and ethnic identifications. It is clear from this example that ethnographic and ethnomethodological attention to *the everyday practices of ethnification and boundary maintenance* is needed to avoid the reification of wishful features of virtual communities over actual situated practice. *Despite the hype over the transcendence possible in cyberspace, the two participants in the example do invoke and communicate cultural distinctions that anchor their identities in processes of ethnification*.

Discussion

Several issues arise from the analysis above of the textual examples promoting computable community and the data fragment illustrating the situated management of virtual ethnicity in intercultural communication.

First, we must carefully peel away the assumptions and ideology of virtual worlds interface design that impact on intercultural interaction. As with all *representational technologies* we find a *reification and naturalisation of the dominant group's images/perceptions of themselves, so that particular social interests are served in the mode of (re)presentation*. In cinema, Dyer (1997: 83) examines the technology of representational practices and finds a bias in the aesthetic technology and its *habitual uses that produces "a look that assumes, privileges and constructs an image of white people."* (14) *Technologies of communication are also ideological*. There is no doubt that a white, male, Anglo bias is *built-in* in particular ways to the design of the communications technology interface. Further work is needed to uncover how language standards, avatar embodiments, communication protocols/affordances, gesture

animations and world settings reproduce white and Western norms and values that have consequences for virtual intercultural communication.

Second, we need to look cautiously at the practices which help constitute boundary maintenance between online and offline, and material and virtual. As Lévy (1998) has argued, the virtual is not a fantasy world in marked contrast to the real world; it is not a de-realisation leading to chaos and anomie. In the extract analysed above, we see the actualisation of particular virtual embodiments, anchoring them in the supposed authenticity of 'offline' ethnic identities. Third, we ought to be cautious about claims that one can transcend the body online. *Avatars are clearly (ac)cultured and socialised*: virtual embodiment and materiality is socially constructed, just as it is in 'meat space'.

Fourth, we should examine how virtual communities are reproducing new forms of banal nationalism. Nationalised worlds in the Active Worlds universe, such as America, England, Finnish, Denmark and Australi, provide spaces for the *virtual diaspora* to congregate in an orgy of banal nationalism. Flags, architectural structures, skylines, as well as well-worn stereotypes, are given a *new life as bitmapped images and spatial structures/animations*. Despite the creative surge to create self-contained simulacra of national identity, Lievrouw (1998) argues that heterotopic communication and discourse in the information society means that we only discuss what concerns ourselves and others who think like us. This does not bode well for resolving inequalities and oppression resulting from increasing corporate globalisation. We increasingly ignore (and have the capacity to ignore) contentious issues on the public "world stage" or in the civil sphere. We can search and find 'sameness' too easily, and disregard the voices of others who, it is asserted, do not belong to 'our culture'. The data extract analysed in this paper can be seen as part of a trend towards the *pursuit of the confirmation of sameness prior to engaging in 'safe' intracultural virtual communication*.

Waller (1997: 91) argues that "the current wave of Internet development (both practically and discursively) is driven by a desire to make cyberspace *safe for essentialist subjectivities of whatever ideological/political persuasion*." Hayles (1993) reminds us that the 'inhabited' Internet is a sanitised body with few reminders or traces of geographical, temporal and political situatedness. And Bailey (1997: 39) claims that *netiquette is primarily to order cyberspace* and to keep out the chaos of the urban sphere. Communication can then take place at a safe distance: a community without contact or difference. Rather than uniformity, homogenisation and Western globalisation, we need to design and campaign for heterogeneity, multiculturalism and difference in intercultural cyberspace. Understanding the investments of companies in virtual communities and the practices of users in their avatar embodiments helps us to appreciate that the campaign has only just begun in this fresh and 'unsettled' domain of virtual life. We need to study further the complexities of virtual intercultural communication, particularly with regard to the *virtualisation of processes of ethnification, acculturation and assimilation*.

NOTES

1. See Damer (1998), Holmes (1997), Jones (1995, 1997, 1998), Porter (1997), Rheingold (1994), Stone (1995), and Turkle (1995).
2. Much has been written about gender on the Internet, but race and ethnicity have received only limited attention (see Bailey 1996, Nakamura 1995, Poster 1998 and Ulmer 1998).
3. The two images can be found at the following Web address on the Internet:
<http://ntpaul.sprog.auc.dk/paul/research/avatars.htm>.
4. The telephone, of course, is an older communications technology that has yet to become ubiquitous globally. Only a tiny minority of the world's population has direct access to a telephone in their home.
5. The general assumption is that English is the natural lingua franca of virtual communications, though other languages are increasingly used online. The dominance of 'CyberEnglish' has been documented by Lockard (1996) and Yates (1997).
6. Richard Dyer (1997: 31-34) reminds us that the image of the 'frontier' is a temporal and spatial concept, signifying a dynamic that enables progress, a border between order and unestablished order, one which is endlessly pushed back.

7. Lockard (1997: 227) notes that "capital has a long history of defining community in reference to profitable or dying technologies - logging towns, boom towns, Dust Bowl ghost towns, Rust Belt mill towns - and now 'virtual communities' have joined the list as the computer industry's contribution."

8. There are several hundred worlds in the Active Worlds universe (circa 1998). When one enters a world, the "immigration officer" automatically greets the new arrival, so the metaphor of geo-national migration is invoked and one is classified linguistically as crossing the boundary between one political territory and another. In the Active Worlds universe there are a limited number of fixed embodiments dependent on the world visited. A paid-up visitor has a choice; a visitor arrives as an unchangeable guest or tourist avatar. See <http://www.activeworlds.com>.

9. Images of the avatars can be seen at the following Web address on the Internet:
<http://ntpaul.sprog.auc.dk/paul/research/dredd.htm>.

10. The equals sign marks when two messages appeared simultaneously on the screen. Messages are not visible to other participants until they are explicitly sent by hitting the carriage return, so when two messages appear in the chat window almost simultaneously they are often sequentially misplaced if read literally. It is a mistaken yet commonly held assumption in much research on computer-mediated communication that temporality is irrelevant to 'synchronous' text communication online. Log files which trace the sequence of messages sent without a record of the time are misleading records of a temporal activity.

11. With regard to membership categorisation, Sacks' (1974: 219-20) first hearer's maxim says that: "if two or more categories are used to categorize two or more members of some population, and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, then: hear them that way."

12. Cp. the 'one drop' legal rule to determine 'race' in the USA during the antebellum period.

13. Bailey (1996) asks if it is possible to have a secure racial identity online or must one just pass as an unannounced 'white'.

14. Dyer (1997) examines light and lighting in film production, but his arguments can also apply to a virtual mise-en-scène. We could focus on how digital 3-D scenes are lit, how monitor displays are biased towards certain colours and how avatars are rendered visible - features which may well contribute to privileging certain groups. For instance, the recent winner of the most humanoid avatar of 1998 in the Avatars 98 conference held in cyberspace can be seen in varying degrees of lightness depending on which software technology one uses to view the avatar. On the web, the half-naked 'Summer' is light-skinned (see <http://millenium/simplenet.com/summer2.htm>), yet as an animation in the virtual world her skin is darker, resembling perhaps an olive-skinned inhabitant of one of the Pacific islands.

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