



4.10 Powering up

4.3.4 Technology and newness in everyday life

To differentiate between stages of children's everyday media culture both *within* the digital era as well as before it brings us again to the question of the newness of new media, of how it is understood and experienced.

CASE STUDY 4.5: Television, innovation and technocultural form

Raymond Williams, writing about the new generation of televisual communication technologies under development in the early 1970s, such as cable and satellite systems, observed that "some of the new technical developments seem to open the way to institutions of a radically different kind from either "public service" or "commercial" broadcasting; indeed of a different kind, in some cases, from "broadcasting" itself" (Williams 1990a: 135). This section of his book *Television: technology and cultural form* is interesting on two counts. First it anticipates the undermining of long-established institutions of broadcasting through new technical and institutional developments. These include the advent of the multiple channels and niche markets of cable, the time-shifting of programme viewing made possible by VHS and later hard-disc video recording and on-demand services, all of which break down the synchronicity of television, and threaten commercial television's reliance on advertising. These developments have accelerated in the Internet era with peer-to-peer sharing of television programmes as digital files, and the fragmentation of such programmes into bite-size and manipulated clips on YouTube. The Internet also appears to have rendered obsolete attempts to use cable television for more participatory and democratic ends. Second, it is telling that Williams lets slip his usual careful resistance to any hint of technological determinism: here the technical developments *themselves* are opening the way to radical change. At times of rapid technological innovation it can be hard to maintain a purely culturalist position.

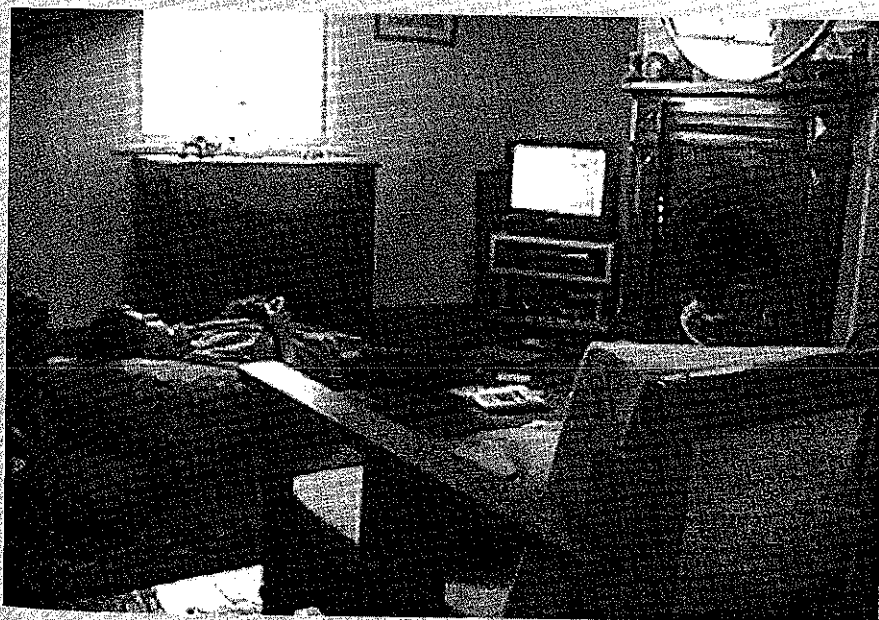
The sheer familiarity and mundanity of television as everyday media culture makes it a useful case study for examining the notion of the newness of new media as experienced in everyday life. It is common for media scholars to debunk excitement about new media technologies by pointing out how quickly these novelties become familiar to us and hence "old". Given the rapid adoption of, say, email

or social networking sites, it could be argued that new media are already thoroughly assimilated into everyday life and therefore no longer 'new', and therefore to attempt to analyse them as novel, revolutionary or transformational is mistaken.

Recent developments in television clearly illustrate this: flat screen LCD televisions and 'home cinema' sound systems are now common, and whereas particularly enormous or high definition screens are still remarkable, they may well not be for long. The challenge then is how to study something so thoroughly woven into the fabric of domestic time and space, to use Roger Silverstone's phrase in his book on television in everyday life (Silverstone 1994: 3). To pursue this textile metaphor, the fabric of everyday life is rapidly stitched back together after each new device or system tears it, and so to examine it we must unpick it again.

First, it is important to note that being familiar with something does not necessarily mean that it is understood. Asserting the mundanity of television overlooks the remarkable extent of its grasp of imagination, shared cultural understanding and communication, and its hold on the rhythms and spaces of everyday life. New media technologies lose their novelty but they don't disappear. It is perhaps precisely at the moment that they become banal and accepted that their full effects are realised (see for instance Miller and Slater 2000 on the 'naturalisation' of the Internet in Trinidad). In debunking wild futurological claims, we should be careful not to miss the very real, ongoing, yet hard to grasp, transformations of everyday life. We might instead try to imagine everyday life *without* media change. For example, in a line from the television sitcom *Friends*, Joey exclaims 'You don't have a TV? What do you point your furniture at?'

Second, it is useful to question the significance or value accorded to different kinds of change. Cybercultural studies is enthralled by paradigm shifts, new ages and near futures. Ethnographic research in everyday media culture is, at its best, sensitive to the micro-increments of change. A good example of this is Bernadette Flynn's wry comparison of Playstation 2 advertisements – in which a living room and its furniture are devastated by the promised gameplay experience – and the actual lived negotiations between children, parents, domestic space and other media practices and routines (television viewing) she observes in her ethnographic studies. This latter is beautifully illustrated by a photograph from one of Flynn's field visits:



4.11 New media ergonomics (Flynn 2003: 568)

The changes here are minute but significant:

During the play session recording, Jack lay on floor cushions in front of the lounge chairs operating the console handset whilst simultaneously chatting to friends on the telephone. Whilst the optimal distance for playing a video game is in between that for a

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television set and computer screen, the layout of [the living room] imposed the optimal distance for viewing television. Removed from the restraint of the lounge suite, Jack, like many players, adopted a position on floor cushions more suited to gameplay (Flynn 2003: 568)

Here is a complex relationship between established objects of cultural studies of everyday life and media studies of audiences, domestic media practices and social relationships (television viewing, telephone use), the cultural traditions of furniture and room layout and the ways of living they reflect; negotiations within household power relationships (who gets to play, or watch, where, and when), etc. There are other changes: the presence of the console in the living room brings 'an often disordered, temporary and flexible arrangement within the more traditional organization of the living room' (Flynn 2003: 571). Flynn notes a significant, gendered, trend in children's culture in which boys' play shifts from outside (the street, the arcade) to the bedroom and living room, transporting 'one system of sexually organized space – the arcade, into another – the more traditional female living-room space of domestic leisure' (Flynn 2003: 569; see also McNamee 1998, Jenkins 1998).

However (and this is our reading of Flynn's findings) more elusive objects are also in play: consumption/viewing/playing positions are established as much by the material affordances of different kinds of furniture, their ergonomic relationships with human bodies, and the capacities of the particular media device, as by cultural conventions or discourses. The point here is that the *materiality* of the furniture, the media technologies, and the human bodies is a crucial factor. These artefacts and bodies have effects on, and shape, social forms and relationships as well as being effects of, and shaped by, them. This shift of focus suggests a different attention to everyday life, an attention to the reciprocity between the social and the material, and suggests further that, from an altered conceptual point of view, the human and the non-human may not be fundamentally distinct: they, at the very least, share a materiality.

This discussion hints at some of the conceptual questions to come in this section, particularly those that arise in the rethinking of human and technological agency in everyday life. It also raises the question of how the significance and texture of everyday technoculture can be fruitfully traced and studied. We will now turn our attention to one area in which Cultural and Media Studies, along with other fields concerned with new media cultures, have felt more confident in their observations of technocultural change and newness: subjectivity and identity.

4.4 The everyday posthuman: new media and identity

In very general terms the various discourses of new media studies often concur that new media herald genuine change in relation to human identity or subjectivity. This may be in terms of an ever more thorough integration of everyday life and the mediasphere (Kinder 1991; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 2001); shifting relationships between the public and private realms or between the individual (or local community) and the global reach of popular media and cultural forms (Mackay 1997; Moores 1993b); the claims for radical experimentation or play with identity in some Internet media (Stone 1995; Poster 1995a; Turkle 1996); or an increasing intimacy or hybridisation between the human and the technological figured in the cyborg (Haraway 1990; Gray 1995).

So questions of the relationship between the human and the technological in new media studies are generally addressed in relation to questions of identity and subjectivity. However, in research on media technologies and identity or subjectivity it is not always clear exactly what is meant by 'identity'. On the one hand it may indicate little more than the day-to-day choices about how an individual chooses to present him or herself to the world (choice of outfit for the day, preference in mobile phone model and ringtone, etc.), on the other a sense of identity 'under construction' implies more fundamental changes in the sense of self, closer

The following discussion should be seen as closely linked with, and complementary to, sections 3.16 through to 3.21. In Part 3 we cover theories of identity and networks in relation to the constitution of communities. Evidently community and individual identity are inseparable; we separate them here in order to address the different overall concerns of Part 3 and this part of the book. Thus here we are concerned more with the local, domestic uses of new media, whilst Part 3 looks to the broader – though interrelated – public, political and economic spheres

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to the claims of cybercultural studies. The rest of this section will examine claims that identity and subjectivity have undergone, or are undergoing, profound changes in the age of new media, and suggest the implications of such claims for an understanding of contemporary lived experience.

4.4.1 From identity 'under construction' to social networks

The web is now the most widely accessed Internet medium and can be seen as both continuous with, and offering distinct new possibilities for, established relationships between public and private space, public and private selves. With the web's inception in the mid-1990s, the personal home page soon came to be a relatively accessible, and distinctly new, form of media 'production'. Designing and publishing a personal website was relatively easy and inexpensive, and allowed the designer to address a (potential) worldwide audience, or engage with a geographically distributed community of interest well beyond the scope of earlier DIY media production. The term 'home page' itself highlighted the relays between public and private space. Even in web browsers and large-scale commercial websites today this reassuringly domestic terminology offers the lost browser a return to a familiar page.

Daniel Chandler studied early individual websites and interviewed their designers. He linked their production with other forms of personal documentation, communication or samizdat publishing (diaries, newsletters, 'round robin' letters, fanzines), but pointed out that where home pages differed was precisely their potential for a global audience. The spare room or bedroom shift in their relationship with the outside world, becoming permeable:

a home in the real world is, among other things, a way of keeping the world out . . . An online home, on the other hand, is a little hole you drill in the wall of your real home to let the world in.

(John Seabrook, quoted in Chandler 1998).

Chandler's main interest, however, was in the ways in which individuals present themselves on websites. Borrowing a metaphor from the conventions of web page production, Chandler argues that just as incomplete web pages are often labelled as 'under construction', so too are the identities of their designers. He describes the aesthetics and construction methods of home page design as 'bricolage'. This term originates in anthropology, denoting the improvised use by pre-industrial peoples of everyday materials and objects to hand in the symbolic practices of art and rituals. The term has been adopted by Cultural Studies to describe the appropriation and manipulation – even subversion – of the meanings of commodities by youth subcultures:

the extraordinary symbolic creativity of the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanize, decorate and invest with meanings their common and immediate life spaces and social practices – personal styles, and choice of clothes; selective and active use of music, TV, magazines; decoration of bedrooms.

(Willis 1990: 2)

See also Hebdige (1979: 103–106)

Susanna Stern also makes the connection between the content and aesthetics of young people's public presentation and self-expression through web page production and the bricolage of the bedroom wall. Through her research into the home pages of adolescent girls, she argues that the construction and presentation of identity is mapped onto 'real world'

gendered practices and spaces. Thus, Stern's research does not find 'fluid' identities as such, rather a more complex picture of self-presentation and construction of image: 'in this study, girls' home pages were ultimately regarded as texts that reflect in some way the selves girls think they are, the selves they wish to become, and most likely, the selves they wish others to see' (Stern 1999: 24).

There are distinct approaches to self-representation in the sites studied, which Stern summarises as 'spirited', 'sombre' and 'self-conscious' sites. Each of these develops new ways of making private practices of identity construction public, from light-hearted listings of likes and dislikes to the presentation of very personal, often painful, reflections or poetry, modes of writing previously confined to diaries and journals. Stern takes this further: the bedroom as a 'safe' if restricted social space for girls is transformed through the use of Internet media into a space for self-expression which is more public, but still safe:

It seems likely that for some girls, the web presents the 'safe company' they need to 'speak their experience' and 'say what is true'. It also seems to grant some girls the freedom to 'develop their sense of possibility and to experience themselves as active agents in their own lives'.

(Stern 1999: 38)

In recent years the weblog or blog has displaced the personal home page as the primary Internet medium for individual professional and non-professional self-expression. The key distinctions from the home page are that no knowledge of HTML editing software or FTP is required to set up a simple blog; the chronological journal or diary-like structure suggests and shapes a particular kind of engagement and content (a more or less frequent updating of thoughts, observations, comments and links to other blogs or sites of interest); and blog software facilitates and encourages other bloggers to link to and comment on the site. Thus the blog lends itself more to sustained and continuous communication than does the home page:

the ability to archive blog posts creates a way to scaffold on previous impressions and expressions; thus, constructing identity can be a continuous process for adolescents, and one to which they can refer. Finally, when blog software offers ways to provide feedback or link to other bloggers, this can foster a sense of peer group relationships.

(Huffaker and Calvert 2005)

Other Internet media and sites have developed their form and content in response to the particular technical format and cultural conventions of the blog, notably YouTube's support for the embedding of its video clips in blog posts, or facilities for linking to users' photograph albums on sites such as Flickr. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook certainly build on the same long-established traditions of vanity publishing and journal-keeping; they often assume, or attempt to initiate, an ongoing communication network with their readers and viewers. They encourage the acquisition of online contacts ('friends'), providing all manner of channels of private and semi-public communication along the lines of email and messaging, but also with more playful modes such as quizzes, remediations of card and board games, virtual gifts, automated comparisons of tastes in literature and film, drawings and photographs, and games, such as Facebook's zombies, that exploit the interwoven networks of friends in a kind of ludic viral marketing.

If web home pages were sites of self-presentation or identity construction through the bricolage of interests, images and links, then personal blogs and social network profiles could

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be seen to add an ongoing identity *performance* both individually and collectively, driven by Web 2.0 technologies of multimedia, content management, network building and persistent communication.

4.4.2 Virtual identity

Our interaction with the world around us is increasingly mediated by computer technology, and [thus] bit by digital bit, we are being 'Borged', as devotees of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* would have it – transformed into cyborgian hybrids of technology and biology through our ever-more-frequent interaction with machines, or with one another through technological interfaces.

(Dery 1994: 6)

The language and concepts of cybercultural studies are shot through with science fiction and cyberpunk imagery, blurring distinctions between the human and machine in near-future worlds replete with media technologies, or riddled with gateways to virtual worlds. These discourses and their cyberpunk imaginary are widely critiqued in those strands of new media studies drawn from Cultural Studies, wary of assumptions of radical newness and the transcendence of historical and social divisions and conflicts via new technologies and their alternative, disembodied worlds. Feminist Cultural Studies in particular has questioned theories that assume a separation of mind (or consciousness or identity) from the body, evident in cybercultural studies (Bassett 1997; Kember 1998), cyberpunk fiction (Squires 1996) and computer sciences such as cybernetics and AI (Hayles 1999).

Yet there are resonances across this discursive divide. Cultural and Media Studies and Feminist Cultural and Media Studies make far-reaching claims for the mutability of the human subject in a heavily mediated culture, whether characterised by print and electronic media, or computer-based media. Moreover, important work on technoscience and technoculture emerges from both Cultural Studies and Feminist Cultural Studies, work that asks serious questions about the nature and volatility of the subject or of identity in a time of rapid technological change.

Theories of the virtual age responding to new computer media such as VR, the Internet and videogames in the 1980s and early 1990s promised the transformation of the everyday, or transport into realms far distant from the everyday. There was a tendency to define these new media and their users in opposition to the embodied and material: the virtual versus the real, play versus consumption, Utopia versus the mundane politics and contractions of the real world, cyberspace and VR versus commercial communications and information media, identity versus corporeality (and all the body's historical and cultural 'baggage'). To question some of the assumptions of the 'virtual age' thesis is not to argue that identities are not being constructed or transformed, or to deny that our increasingly intimate relationships with machines and networks challenge long-held conceptual oppositions between the local and global, public and private, or consumption and production. Indeed media technologies can be seen as implicated in a shifting sense of identity in numerous ways, including the following:

- through changes in mass media: we have seen, for example, how developments in television broadcasting can facilitate the presentation or performance of identity;
- through consumption as an active practice of bricolage, constructed through the images and consumer goods we 'choose', a process perhaps given new impetus by the interactive and reproductive power of digital software;

New media in everyday life

- identity can be 'constructed' in cyberspace or virtual worlds;
- as individuals within virtual communities;
- virtual reality and cyberspace are undermining (our understanding of) the real, within which we have constructed our identities;
- an ever more intimate relationship with technologies and media from the Internet to genetic engineering, raising questions of the boundaries between the human body and consciousness, machines and networks;
- that new media are only a part, however significant, of the impact of broader historical economic and/or cultural change on identity.

As the excitement of the early 1990s and its assumptions of widespread entry (or upload) of human consciousness into virtual reality fades into cultural history, critiques of its naively increasingly seem to have been misplaced, as attacks on straw men, running the risk of missing significant concepts and objects of study bound up in this technocultural idealism. If we put the fictional cyborgs in Dery's statement to one side (for now), the statement can be reread: it is clear that interaction with the world *is* increasingly mediated by computer technology, people *do* experience ever-more-frequent interaction with sophisticated machines – and with one another – through technological interfaces. Increasingly intimate relationships with machines and networks *do* challenge long-held conceptual and lived oppositions between the local and global, public and private, consumption and production, or as we shall see later, between the human and the non-human.

The discursive constitution of identity, subjectivity, and old and new media and technologies is thoroughly tangled. As we have noted, 'identity' and 'subjectivity' are rarely defined, are used differently in different discourses, and are often apparently interchangeable. Also, the term 'real world' should be read with caution. Virtual environments and media are no less real for being virtual – they exist as both data and lived experience. What follows is a short survey of how new media studies have constituted the relationship between identity, subjectivity, the body, technology and media.

What is new about networks?

New media studies generally concerns itself with networked new media, and the Internet media in particular. Much of the early excitement about the possibilities for users to present or perform alternative identities, to *play* with identity was predicated on the simple fact that Internet users were geographically remote from one another. Hence conventional markers of identity become irrelevant because users cannot see each other. This then, it has been argued, facilitates new online cultures based on meritocratic principles in which often marginalised people (the young, women, the disabled, black people) can be accepted for their knowledge or communicational skill.

In bulletin boards like The Well, people connect with strangers without much of the social baggage that divides and alienates. Without visual cues about gender, age, ethnicity, and social status, conversations open up in directions that otherwise might be avoided. Participants in these virtual communities often express themselves with little inhibition and dialogues flourish and develop quickly.

(Poster 1995a: 90)

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From this, some make the bolder claim that with online communication in 'cyberspace' or virtual reality, not only can we not be seen, but we are liberated to present our identities in new ways, or more profoundly, develop new identities – playful identities in which gender, race, species even, become fluid. Sherry Turkle has addressed the individual's sense of self in computer networked communication. She sees networks as potential 'identity workshops' in which identity is refracted through role-play and remote interaction with other users: 'The self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to "try out" new ones' (Turkle 1996: 356).

From this, early cybercultural studies sometimes made the bolder claim that in online communication in cyberspace, not only can we 'float free of biological and sociocultural determinants', but in some way our bodies are left behind in 'incorporeal interaction' (Dery 1994: 3). Thus not only can we present ourselves as a different gender, race or species, we could be disembodied (see 5.4.4). While the fevered predictions of the early 1990s about the imminent uploading of human consciousness to cyberspace may have faded, current academic and popular debates on digital culture often still assume a fundamental separation between actual space and virtual space, and between the actual domestic, everyday lives of the users and players of virtual spaces and their presence (through avatars for example) within the virtual.

Does then the everyday engagement with Internet media escape established patterns of play and the negotiations and constructions of identity in 'old' media consumption? On what notions of historical, technological or cultural change are these incorporeal virtual identities based? Alluquere Roseanne Stone asks 'what is new about networking?' and gives two possible answers. The first is 'nothing', i.e. communicating via a computer network is little different from using the telephone (though this overlooks the possibility that early telephony might in itself have been a profound proto-cybercultural experience!). The second possible answer is 'everything': networks could be seen as more like public theatre than 'old' media, as new arenas for social experience and dramatic communication, 'for qualitative interaction, dialogue and conversation' (Stone 1995: 16). Stone asserts that the second answer is true and argues that this has profound implications for our sense of our selves as bodies in space, our sense of 'presence'. She argues that the relationship between the material nature of the body – the 'physical envelope' – and the identity with which it once seemed coterminous is 'embedded in much larger shifts in cultural beliefs and practices [including] repeated transgressions of the traditional concept of the body's physical envelope and of the locus of human agency' (Stone 1995: 16). For Stone, these larger shifts are symptomatic of nothing less than the end of the 'mechanical age', and the beginning of the 'virtual age' (Stone 1995: 17). Others concur. Mark Poster is one contemporary writer on new media who sees the advent of electronic media as analogous in historical importance to that of movable type. New media mark the end of the modern era and usher in postmodern subjectivity:

In the twentieth century electronic media are supporting an equally profound transformation of cultural identity. Telephone, radio, film, television, the computer and now their integration as 'multimedia' reconfigure words, sounds and images so as to cultivate new configurations of individuality. If modern society may be said to foster an individual who is rational, autonomous, centered, and stable . . . then perhaps a postmodern society is emerging which nurtures forms of identity different from, even opposite to those of modernity. And electronic communications technologies significantly enhance these postmodern possibilities.

(Poster 1995a: 80)

Cutting across cybercultural (and postmodernist) thought we can see quite diverse assumptions about relationships between the individual or subject, media technology, and historical and cultural change. The question we must now ask is: what role might media technologies play in effecting or facilitating changes in identity or subjectivity? As Poster indicates above, the development of print through movable type in the mid-fifteenth century is generally seen as the first mass medium and is often cited as a key factor in the development of modern rationality and subjectivity, and the undermining of the medieval religious world (see also McLuhan 1962, Birkerts 1994, and Provenzo 1986).

It could be argued that the epochal shift from the mechanical to the virtual is not quite so clear cut. Poster for example seems confused as to whether his 'postmodern possibilities' are the product of new media in particular, or electronic media (including television and radio) in general. The above quote suggests the latter, but elsewhere he specifically identifies digital media as the point of rupture. Against the 'alienation' of 'one-way' broadcast media, he posits the many-to-many system of the Internet:

the question of the mass media is seen not simply as that of sender/receiver, producer/consumer, ruler/ruled. The shift to a decentralized network of communications makes senders receivers, producers consumers, rulers ruled, upsetting the logic of understanding of the first media age.

(Poster 1995a: 87-88)

Stone, however, is clear on the distinction between old and new. It rests on the networked structure of new media use. Thus 'one-to-one' telephone conversations and 'one-to-many' model of broadcast media are superseded by 'many-to-many' communications facilitated by Internet media

4.4.3 Virtual ethnography

A comprehensive understanding of relationships between identity, technologies, and everyday life must draw on ethnographic approaches and description. The ethnography of new media cultures faces distinct challenges. There are questions of the *sites*, as well as the subjects, of ethnographies of new media cultures. Christine Hine outlines an established view of ethnography as 'the sustained presence of an ethnographer in the field setting, combined with intensive engagement with the everyday life of the inhabitants of the field site, which make for the special kind of knowledge we call ethnographic' (Hine 2000: 63-64). Traditional ethnography then is site-specific: Miller and Slater argue that even Internet ethnography can be sited in actual places, 'by investigating how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular . . .' (Miller and Slater 2000:1). How then to conduct an ethnography that describes both actual and virtual spaces?

Hine makes (after Clifford Geertz) a key distinction between two broad and contradictory approaches to 'traditional' ethnography:

The ethnographer is able to use this sustained interaction to 'reduce the puzzlement' (Geertz, 1993: 16) which other people's ways of life can evoke. At the same time, ethnography can be a device for inducing that same puzzlement by 'displacing the dulling sense of familiarity with which the mysteriousness of our own ability to relate perceptively to one another is concealed from us' (Geertz, 1993: 14).

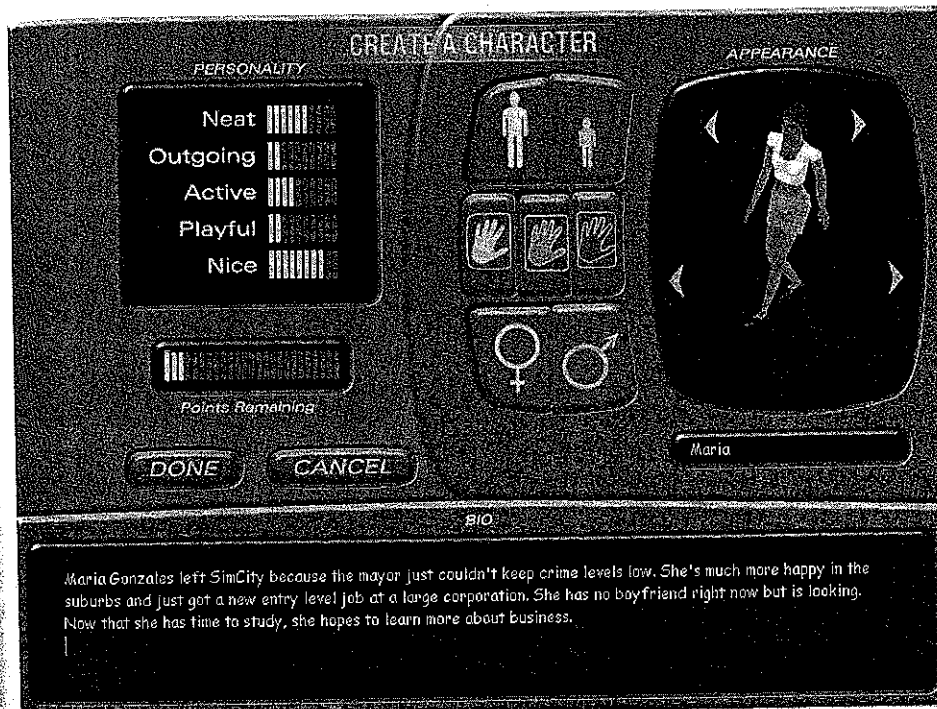
(Hine 2000: 64)

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This latter strategy, of inducing puzzlement (perhaps denaturalising, 'making strange') is particularly suggestive for the study of the researcher's own culture (or subcultures or groups thereof). Hine is clear that her intentions, in studying the Internet, are thus oriented; such an approach allows for the description and articulation of the familiar and the strange, the established and the novel. The following case study exemplifies this.



4.12 Identity play? *The Sims*. © Electronic Arts Inc. All rights reserved

There is now a substantial body of 'virtual ethnographic' research, the most interesting of which traces the interpenetration of virtual and actual worlds (see for example Hine 2000, Slater 1998, Taylor 2006, Dixon and Weber 2007). The attention of this research to the textures of actual/virtual cultures and events is rich and productive, but it can be noted that its primary concern is often with the conversations and relationships between human participants and the broader contexts of language and culture that position them. Explicit attention is rarely given to the nature or specific effects of the technologies that facilitate or afford these cultures and identity games in the first place. This accounts for new media studies' focus on networked communication, on the relationships between humans across the various Internet media. It also explains the reluctance to study direct relationships between the human and the technological in digital environments, for example that between player-avatars and the non-human agents (bots) in online games. There are important exceptions to this general rule. For example, Turkle's assessment of the possibilities of identity play online is based very much on her earlier work on the relationship between computer users, their identities, their computers and the programs (including games) they were using. It is not only information and images that this technology allows us to experiment with and manipulate, she argues, but also the user's personality, identity and sexuality (Turkle 1984: 15). Here then identity play is

CASE STUDY 4.6: Cyberferret and play with virtual gender

Caroline Bassett's ethnographic study 'Virtually Gendered: life in an online world' (1997) undermines assumptions that virtual worlds (and our identities within them) fully escape the actual world, that visitors to them leave behind their sociocultural contexts. She notes the diverse and ostensibly emancipatory presentations of self in the playful virtual environment of Xerox's PARC research centre online world: LambdaMOO. As with other MUDs, LambdaMOO has a text-based interface, and citizens present themselves through three basic attributes: name, gender and appearance, all represented to other users as textual description. They can also 'build' themselves a textual home, its design reflecting their new identity. For example exploring ambiguity and androgyny:

Neuterworld.

A bland, white room. Clean air is sucked into your nostrils and unclean exhalation is sucked out of the room through the huge roof mounted extractor fan. A sense of peace pervades the whole room. Bara is here

Bara.

A tall, dark individual of slight build. This person is curious in that it is impossible for you to tell whether it is male or female!

It is sleeping.

(Bassett 1997: 541)

Whilst sympathetic to the possibilities of MUDs and related online communication forms, Bassett questions uncritical notions of new free-floating identities in cyberspace, observing that whilst some participants do experiment with very different characteristics, or multiple 'identities', this is by no means practised by all. Thus while some take advantage of the transgressive genders allowed by the MUD:

E looks content, and eir eyes beam at you with a kind of amusement . . . the black suede mini hugs Peri's hips and barely covers eir crotch, black suede glistening in the light or lack there of. Carrying bodysuit; nipple clamps . . .

E carries a [hash] note on Eir gender in Real Life . . .

(Bassett 1997: 545)

Most adhere to stereotyped constructions of masculinity or femininity.

Beige Guest

One luscious babe, with a flowing mane of brilliant red hair, with crystal emerald eyes, and the most enchanting smile on earth.

(Bassett 1997: 546)

Bassett notes that it is probable that such hyperfeminine presentation is almost certainly that of a male participant. Even shifting identity to an inanimate object or animal does not automatically mean an escape from the gendered structures of Real Life:

Cyberferret is a ferret . . . with several cybernetic implants. One leg is bionic, and his entire skeletal system is made of titanium. He is looking for something to KILL!

(Bassett 1997: 549)

Cyberferret aside, most online identities within LambdaMOO are, regardless of their play with gender, overwhelmingly presented as being white, attractive and young. This counters any straightforward assumption that identity construction is free from real life constraints and distinctions. Bassett draws on Judith Butler's concept of identity formation as 'performative', that is to say that identity (and in gender in particular) is not so much constructed as constantly materialised through acts in language.

Despite this, Bassett argues for two progressive readings of 'the small world' of Lambda. The first is that it highlights gender as constructed and 'unnatural', and second she implies that Real Life discourses are not entirely dominant in cyberspace, that Lambda does provide 'spaces for disruption, for the possibility of gender-play, and for the emergence of new forms of multiple subjectivity' (Bassett 1997: 550). Identities and subject positions persist across the actual and the virtual, but not without the possibility of transformation and play.

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effected through the feedback between individual and machine, not between individuals through networks. This raises a couple of important points. The cybercultural paradigm of free-floating identity play in virtual worlds is not necessarily predicated on remote communication between humans: the technological imaginary of networked virtual reality is rooted in the interactive engagement with the space of the computer game. It follows then that, at the very least, new media studies' conceptualisation of identity and subjectivity should encompass the direct relationship between human and machine as well as the relationships between humans facilitated by machines.

For example, the characteristics of online 'identity' have shifted somewhat with the advent of graphically sophisticated persistent virtual worlds of *Second Life* and games such as *World of Warcraft*. Rather than the player's descriptive skills, the avatar is developed through the software conventions and defaults of the world itself and time; application, aptitude and technical resources are required to produce a more customised avatar. To engage fully in these worlds and realise their ludic and creative potential also requires substantial investments of time, effort and ability (and money). In *World of Warcraft* this means the forging and maintenance of teams of players to undertake quests, levelling up through the acquisition (within the diegesis of the game) of financial, armorial and supernatural resources. Similarly in *Second Life*, to build a house, and to learn how to make (and then distribute or sell) virtual objects, requires many hours learning the software, developing skills, networking and expertise.

Whatever identity play might be evident in these everyday virtual practices, it is only one of a broader range of playful (and work-like) activities and processes, shaped by the affordances of the software and the social (and game) rules established by both the corporations that run these worlds (for *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*: Blizzard and Linden Labs respectively) and the protocols and norms established, negotiated and fought for by the players themselves (in this sense these graphic virtual worlds are similar to social networking sites). Tanya Krzywinska suggests that

Identity play is only one aspect [of *World of Warcraft*], however, and for many it tends to tail off after a while as it is harder to maintain the more you play. Transformational elements do not simply operate in terms of identity play; becoming more skilled at playing the game, making for a greater sense of agency and acting as an *apparent* foil to the forces of determination, is also a form of pleasure-generating transformation.

(Krzywinska 2007: 117).

What is needed is a model of enquiry that factors in both the intangible nature of subjectivity and the materiality of the technologies and techniques with which subjectivity is interwoven.