INCorporated Avatars: Organisational Contradictions in Cyberspace

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Francisco Varela, whose thoughts are influenced by Eastern philosophies, states that he has had only one question all of his life: "Why emergent selves, virtual identities, pop up all over the place creating worlds, whether at the mind/body level, cellular level, or the transorganism level? This phenomenon is so productive that it doesn't cease creating entirely new realms: life, mind and societies. (1) Even though he speaks of identities in terms of cellular, immune and biological systems, this train of thought could easily be transposed to on-line environments where the population of the emergent selves is growing faster than anyone could have ever imagined.

Emergent selves in multi-user environments are called "avatars"; a word that has assumed a much narrower meaning than it's original theological source. For most who are familiar with multi-user environments, the word simply means - "an assumed identity in cyberspace". Yet, personalities from high tech worlds, who are responsible for conceptualising these spaces are intentionally incorporating various New Age philosophies into the environments being built.

The trend of organically structuring corporate organisations is related to religious beliefs that are inherently structured on hierarchical principles. In the 1950's, connections between modern Christians to the organic models of organisation were seen by F.W. Dillstone, who writes: "..because of its relation to the New Testament conception of the Body, Divinely originated and sustained, then organic structures and categories must be of particular importance to Christian theologians and sociologists. "(2) Tertullian, one of the fathers of the Christian church, coined the word *corporation* in A.D. 190 from the Latin corporare, "to make into a body," using it in ecclesiastical law. (3)

New Ageism typically encompasses an eclectic mix of different religious elements, claiming no alliances to nationality or even specific Gods. Still, the strong ideological character remains, linked very much to cultural processes and marketing of products along with ideas, and seems to be the pervasive in the structuring of a significant number of new high tech corporations. Certainly, the very choice of naming an identity in networked spaces an "avatar" indicates this trend. The avatar in cyberspace, therefore, represents this strange interplay of left wing utopianism with right wing entreprenurism, mixed up with esoteric spiritualism. New Age religion operates in tandem with the networking technologies and the "organic" corporate structures, the new "cool" companies that are emerging all over the high tech industry map.

According to the Dictionary of Hinduism, Avatara means "descent", especially of a god from heaven to earth. (4) In the Puranas and Epic an avatara is an incarnation, and is distinguished from a divine emanation (vyuha), both of which are associated with Visnu and Siva, but particularly the former. The avatara concept is probably a development of the ancient myth that, by the creative power of his Maya, a god can assume any form at will, as did Indra. The avatara concept in Hinduism is a very complex hierarchical system with many different forms taking place. In contemporary India, distinguished personalities may be called avatars, which is a sign that even at the source, the original theological meaning has shifted in popular culture. But, nothing like what is happening with the term in the West, especially in the realm of cyberspace.

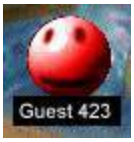
Take for instance, a major personality of the new high tech cults - Mark Pesce, the "guru" and co-creator of VRML. A biographical sketch about him, found on the Web, reads:" ...after a decade of working with data communications, he left Shiva Corporation to found the Ono-Sendai Corporation, an early virtual reality company. After leaving Ono-Sendai in 1993, Mr. Pesce began working on Labyrinth, the prototype for Virtual Reality Modeling Language. Mark Pesce could easily be identified as a personality embodying the contradictions these spaces are composed of. To get a better idea of the ideas that are converging in this newly evolving corporate culture, all one needs to do is go down the list of the table of contents of his homepage. He states his belief in perceptual cybernetics and the emergence of sacred art, and that his approach is a combination of strict rationalism with blatant mysticism. Pesce makes a connection between Deleuze, McLuhan, de Chardin, Manturana, Varela, and esoteric Witchcraft. Virtual Reality, according to Pesce, "in its evocation in cyberspace, the realm of holosthetic communication, is the nuclear weapon of the human mind."(4)

Pesce's visionary software did take off, and has become a tool used by major corporations and indepenedent artists for development of dynamic 3D worlds on the Web. These environments were preceded by the still very active text-based virtual realities, MUDs and MOOs. Some of the most significant research done to date on MUDs and MOOs has taken place at

Xerox Parc, University of Virginia and the MIT media lab. At Xerox Parc, Curtis Pavel established LambdaMOO and wrote on the social phenomena of Text-Based virtual realities. (5) Surprisingly, even though he created this virtual community under the auspices of a large and powerful corporation, he failed to contextualize his activity within a corporate architecture, or to explore why Xerox is interested in investigating this field. The research conducted in various think-tanks is now very useful and relevant to those who are planning commercial ventures with multi-user communities on the Web. There are over 500 MOOs in existence, with hundreds of thousands of users who could potentially make an easy transition from the text based environments to the graphically designed spaces.

More recently, Graphical Multi-User Konversations ("GMUKs," also called "habitats" by Randy Farmer, the first to invent them) [1] are something of a cross between a MOO and a chat room or channel. Rather than limiting users to text-only communications, as in most virtual chat environments, GMUKs add a audio-visual dimension that creates the illusion of movement, and space. It allows people to express their identity visually, rather than through written words. The result is a whole new realm for self-expression and social interaction with exciting possibilities for all who have had experience in text-only chat rooms. But, it is questionable if the addition of graphics means necessarily a step forward from the text based MOOs. Conceptually, one may easily make a leap to situations invoked by Neil Stephenson in Snow Crash, which by the way, now has an entire multi-user site dedicated to the novel and functions as an extension of it. [2]

The most popular GMUK, however, is Time-Warner's "Palace", a client/server program that creates a visual and spatial chat environment. [3] Currently, there are many Palace sites located across the Internet, varying widely in technical and artistic sophistication as well as graphical themes. Jim Bumgardner and Mark Jeffrey created and designed The Palace at Time Warner's Palace Group. The software was released in November 1995. More than 300,000 client versions have been downloaded since then, and over 1,000 commercial and private-hosted Palace communities have been established. Major investors include Intel, Time Warner, Inc. and Softbank. Companies like Capitol Records, Twentieth Century Fox, Fox Television, Sony Pictures, MTV, and many others have created Palace servers.

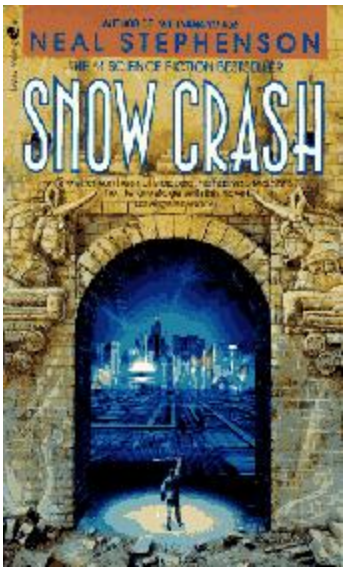


Here we witness how Time/Warner group approaches the creation and dissemination of "avatars". "Avs," as Palace members affectionately call them, fall into two overall categories. The first are the standard set of "smileys" that come with the Palace program. These faces are available to all users, including unregistered "guests." The standard avs are associated with newbies, the unregistered guests who are considered a lower class in the Palace population. They have not paid the registration fee, they do not belong to the Palace culture and are limited to wearing only the standard avs and props. They cannot create their own avatars and are reduced to wearing a smiley which identifies them as a newbie. Only after paying the registration fee can the user unlock the prop creating/editing feature of the Palace software. Only then are they able to choose from Animal, Cartoon, Celebrity, Evil, Real, Idiosyncratic, Positional, Power, Seductive or "Other" avatars. The Palace is an excellent example of an environment in cyberspace that is a combination of the established entertainment industry's approach to the programming for the public and the architecture of developments such as Disenyland or any planned community. This way of thinking is still the usual blatant entreprenism, without much left wing utopianism or esoteric spiritualism. It may be that these multi-user environments are becoming the arena where power struggles between established entertainment industry and the newly developing corporations are taking place. Or, could it be that a completely new hybrid organizational structure may emerge?

One thing is certain - the avatar business is booming. Major companies are investing in creation of on-line communities and placing their bets on this becoming a "virtual entertainment ground". Rich Abel, president and CEO of Worlds INC declares in a recent press release announcing their new software: "AlphaWorld is all about exploring the third dimension. It's about building a 3D home on the Web, instead of merely a home page. It's about sight, sound, sensory experience and interaction with interesting people on-line...AlphaWorld thoroughly enhances the Web experience by extending reality and eliminating cultural, economic, geographic and time barriers enabling activities and experiences not possible in reality...Unlike the millions of static 2D Web sites that crowd the Internet, AlphaWorld is a dynamic place where users can chat with other people, express their personality and mood, stake a claim to build their dream home, take a walk, or attend virtual events." (6) Further into the press release, a more direct marketing approach is taken: "Consider this: a virtual trade show that never closes, complete with booths, displays, product demonstrations, and shows. Or a showroom with operating products on display. Or a virtual visit to a theatre, a hotel, or cruise ship. There is no more powerful way to market and promote. What kind of world would you like us to build for you?" How about the kind that doesn't replicate the worlds mentioned?

BREAKING THE METAPHOR

"It breaks the metaphor. The avatar is not acting like a real body. It reminds all the Black Sun's patrons that they are living in a fantasy world. People hate to be reminded of this."



Neal Stephenson, Snow Crash(7)

There is a need for alternate worlds to be built with more complex renditions of identity and community building and not simply replicating the existing physical structures or hierarchies. Creating a way for people to adjust to the idea of intelligent artifacts is particularly useful for the art community to consider. Our culture has been resistant to, and yet fascinated by the idea of intelligent machines, and in particular to communication or developing relationships with artificial intelligence. For many, this is even more frightening than the idea of the self having another "unconscious" aspect where some of the most dramatic psychological events happen. Artificial intelligence challenges the idea that we are somehow separate from the artifice. Since people seem to accept the idea of avatars with much less suspicion, allowing creation of intelligent avatars may be the approach to this problem.

In on-line communities, it is not unusual to find computer programs known as "bots" presenting themselves or being presented as living people. Most "bots" still reside in text-based environments which makes it almost impossible to tell if one is communicating with another person, or if a program is responding to key words one types in. A program named Julia that resides on a computer in Pittsburgh is one of the most advanced examples of this. Created by Michael Maudlin of Carnegie Mellon University, Julia is full of humorous remarks, controversial statements drawn from computer databases, and can even simulate typographic errors common to real time communication. Even though she still operates as a simple concept of a basic chat-type communication, and is represented on the web page as a robot-maid, she is a good example of the impact an artificial intelligence programmed to function in a multi-user society. (8)

Bodies INCorporated is a project that actively incorporates the idea of avatars, with the intention of shifting the discourse of the body from the usual idea of flesh and identity. It is planned to have a number of artificial intelligence programs integrated into the environment over which there wouldn't be too much control. An avatar IS, but a member is made, and frequently the force, energy, purpose or will of a corporate Entity will utilise the vehicles of a member in order to contact the physical planes. Every members' Body represented is the locus of the contradictions of functioning in the hi-tech environment, while being in the Meta-Body, the Entity in the business of service.

In order to function effectively as a service provider, Seven Advisory Boards have been constituted: Philosophical, Academic, CEO, Spiritual, Business, Legal and Aesthetic. The number seven governs the periodicity of the phenomena of life, and is found dominating the series of chemical elements, and is equally paramount in the world of colour and sound.

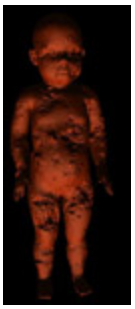
Space, which has ignorantly been proclaimed as an abstract idea and a void is, in reality a container for the body of the corporation with its seven principles.

The bodies of the Board of Directors and the Advisory Boards rarely take form as visible bodies - some are public, some act anonymously, all reside on the memory board that is to be interpreted in terms of force and energy - they are the embodied principles. But, it is important to remember that this means that the force and energy of one of the principles of the Logos are pouring through Them via that which corresponds to the Monad. The memory Board , where They dwell, exists in physical matter, but it is a matter of higher ethers of the physical plane, and only when we develop etheric vision will be mystery be revealed. A reflection of this method can be seen when a member steps out of their body and permits Them to use it.

Bodies INCorporated does not freely dispense the title of an Avatar, but staying true to the root of the word, mandates that the member gains enough shares in the corporate body as s/he moves from being a member to adept, to finally realising the goal of becoming an avatar.

MEMBER

A member demonstrates intelligent activity in personality, and is evolving consciously to the next level. Member's originating impulse comes from the egoistic aspect that functions on a process of the law of Economy, which is the law of substance itself. Those of us who live in market economies have accepted the idea that when competitive conditions exist, whatever payment we receive is fair. The member typically comes into being through the egoistic impulse, based on desire and the relation of the Self to the Not-Self. Because everyone is self-interested, they strive to produce the best quotes, death methods and body enhancements, knowing that they will be fairly compensated. By active participation in the corporation and gaining 500 shares, member is promoted to being and adept.



ADEPT

An adept has gained control over the material aspects and strives to utilise the power gained by proposing world building that is accepted and approved by the Boards. Advisory Boards are composed of adepts and avatars only. Desire for sentient existence is but a latent second aspect seeking expression by means of the Not-self, and in other cases the manifested second aspect consciously utilises from as a means to an end.

AVATAR

In the cases of avatars, it is the Will aspect which is brought into play, taking form for a specific purpose. It involves a higher display of creative faculty that is displayed by the Adept in the creation of a Body of manifestation, the Mayavirupa. The Mayavirupa is literally the illusory form; it is the body of temporary manifestation which the Adept creates on occasion of the power of the will and in which s/he functions in order to make certain contacts. The terms "appropriation of a body" or 'construction of a body" must be extended to include all the planes of the corporate system.

NOTES

1) F. RANDALL F. et al. From Habitat to Global Cyberspace, unpublished, available via the World Wide Web: http://www.communities.com/paper/hab2cybr.html -- Back

2) Snowcrash web site: http://pudding.net/snow -- Back

3) SULER, J. (Nov. 1996). The Psychology of Cyberspace. World Wide Web, http://www1.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber Although this research on the Palace reads more like a promotional site than a critical study, it still is an excellent source for looking into the various elements this site is composed of. -- Back

4) Worlds INC (Oct 14,1996)available via the World Wide Web: http://www.worlds.net/custom/index.html -- Back

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5. PESCE, M., (1996), Homepage: http://www.hyperreal.com/~mpesce -- Back

6. CURTIS P. (1992) Mudding: Social Phenomena in Text-based Virtual realities, unpublished, available via anonymous ftp://parcftp.xerox.com/pub/MOO/papers/DIAC92 -- Back

7. STEPHENSON, N. (1992) Snow Crash, New York: Bantam Books -- Back

8. MAUDLIN M. Julia, a Chatterbot, unpublished, available via the World Wide Web: http://fuzine.mt.cs.cmu.edu/mlm/julia.html -- Back