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Anita Greenhill
University of Salford

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Anita Greenhill
University of Salford
anita@spaceless.com

Abstract

Identity construction in computer mediated environments as in 'real life' environments, are influenced by existent social processes. As Information systems continue to take advantage of technological developments they move more consistently to occupy virtual spaces. As this happens the people who are involved with using systems, such as Web Information systems, also move more readily into emerging virtual environments. In these virtual environments the computer screen mediates specific experiences of localised physicality, however these computer mediated experiences do not alter the over all sense of being for the individual. Virtual existence is not and is never likely to be a separated existence detached from all other notions or understanding of the self. To interact with the Web Information System in virtual space the individual does not leave the essence of themselves on one side of the screen to acquire a new layer of meanings and self-ascription within the virtual space. Identity construction is similarly a complex process in cyberspace as it is in 'real life'.

In this paper I will present a post-structural discussion arguing that electronic identity enables a deconstruction of the Mind/Body dichotomy. I argue that when individuals interact with a Web Information System, in virtual space, they do not leave the essence of themselves on one side of the screen to acquire a new layer of meaning and self-ascription within the virtual space that the system occupies. This argument supports the theoretical imperative to critically examine structural dichotomies and to challenge and politically empower those who are impeded by these polarisations.

Keywords: Critical analysis, identity, identity construction, social processes, meaning, Web Information Systems, virtual reality.

Computer mediated identity as with that of real life is socially constructed.[1] Information Systems have become increasingly integral elements of online communications and processing in, for example, intra and extranets, Decision Support Systems, Expert Support Systems and Group Support System. The incorporation of online technology into organisational activity has occurred primarily in the name of user-friendliness ((Standing and Vasudavan 2000)). Many contemporary Information System studies explore the Internet or an Intranet's operations and remind their readers that an integral element of these systems is the new technologically enabled space within which these systems are contained. However, it is rare that Information Systems, irrespective of their provenance, are acknowledged as contributing to the identity construction of users. The 'presence' of users as a component of the system necessitates identity within technologically enabled spaces is experienced through the technological mediation of the screen. This is an homogenising influence which emphasises particular methods of interaction and, in turn, impacts upon the interpretation and ascription of identities that can be 'virtually' achieved via the information system.

[1]Discussion surrounding the philosophical discourse of the self, consciousness and reality presents a multiplicity of positions. I situate my argument within social constructionism by assuming that all forms of knowledge exist in a relationship of relativity to the influences of social and cultural factors. As a consequence, the construction of self identity and the identification of others is itself a series of dynamic and everchanging processes. In this paper, however, my discussion focuses upon the experiences of electronically crafted space and the consequences of constructing identity in this environment.

The construction of computer mediated identity is a fraught position found between the interposed detachment of the screen and the immersive qualities found 'in' virtual space. The articulation of the interactive relationship between the machine and the user in this environment is of "exoticness".[2] The interaction brings with it an experienced of distancing, where interchange is anchored by the screen (cf. Argyle 1969;75). This is a simulacrum[3] in which layers of meaning electronically overlay, and 'interlay', the 'presence' of the interactive space. It is argued, (Spencer; …) that this exotic configuration provides a disassociation from real life experience which, in turn, enables a rethinking of the social influences that contribute to how individuals construct their identities. Poststructural approaches to interpreting society through deconstruction are particularly suited to the examination of computer mediated identity, and in my opinion should be drawn upon more readily in Information Systems studies. The human/machine polarisations claimed for this space imitate the heavily trodden terrain of the mind/body dichotomy. Poststructural theory argues that these dualistic reductions, contribute to the reproduction of hegemonic power relations.

As a facet of such reductions the construction of computer mediated identity occurs when people interact with others through a computer interface that replaces the proxemics found with face to face communication. In many instances in Information Systems development it is the impact, addressing or altering of proxemics that is the primary objective when converting existing information Systems from "real life" occupation to the virtual platform. Nonetheless for the user, an understanding, familiarity and interpretation of an identity is dynamically constructed regardless of platform. For the user often identity is negotiated around an altered set of dichotomised cultural cues as a result of the lack of the 'conventional' reference points to previous identities. However it is possible that with careful consideration and recognition the dualisms of mind/ body, public/ private and others could be diminished, if not totally dissolved, within the context of a Web Information System embracing virtual space (McRae 1996; 245). A shift in the manner through which identity is referenced within the Web Information System could assist in constructing the system as a social space, albeit one defined through the social worlds of 'real life' (Richardson 1974; 5,8).

The significance of spatial arrangements within Web Information Systems and in the construction and contextualising of identity is evident when examining, for example, the formation of public and private identities. The manner in which spatial phenomena are variously experienced as consumer, kin, worker, audience member, sexual being, citizen and as an 'other' similarly indicates the shifting frameworks by which we are understood and presented to those around us. These shifting relationships suggest that the experience of the social within the computer mediated space of a Web Information System can be considered as familiar interaction but one that is experienced in location of reordered significance. Contrariwise, as places founded upon the full range of cultural and social imperatives provided by the machinations of advanced capitalism, it is clear that many existing suppositions regarding human communication and interaction persist within Web Information Systems. The points of departure, if any exist, from other social spaces and their analysis is found in the extent to which 'real life' social structures can be claimed to have become untenable or irrelevant in these types of Information Systems. These are arguably replaced by formations that can be claimed as 'new'. More reasonably, these 'new' social structures are the result of shifted emphasis of the 'social' into unusual or unexpected orders.

Various disparate visions of virtual space and the Web are manifested in descriptions such as the techno-utopian boosterism of Nicholas Negroponte (1995), the celebratory new-ageism of Douglas Rushkoff (1994), the jaded dystopia found by Clifford Stoll (1995) or the masculinist jungle described by Dale Spender (1995). There is a need, however, to treat with caution these, and any, descriptions of virtual space which attempt to describe a range of observed phenomena and experiences as universal expectations.

Interaction and communication must eventually occur between people, although this interaction can be indefinitely deferred across time and space. Entering virtual space through a Web Information System as with other computer-mediated experiences de-emphasises the corporeal cues to identity (Gumpert & Drucker 1994; 169,170). Unlike communications media such as television, radio and telephone which rely upon visual, aural or oral information to assist in the construction of identity, the World Wide Web of 2002 remains a generally textual and anonymous arena for communication and interaction. Identity or identities, then, can be heavily constructed in this space through one's own volition, without the direct influence of cultural assumptions and social stereotypes made by 'others' from a physical presence. This situation does not, however, disentangle or dissolve the range of power relations which inform our movement through Web mediated spaces (Kendall 1996; 213). In Web Information System

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[2]For further insight on this notion see Said E 1979, *Orientalism,* New York: Vintage Books.

[3]For an explanation of simulacrum see Baudrillard J 1994, *Simulacra and Simulations,* Sheila Faria Glaser (trans.), Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

> "The simularum is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true"

Ecclesiastes cited in Baudrillard, J 1988, *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings*, Poster M (ed) Stanford: Stanford University Press, p.166.

interaction cues are still sought in order to define the relationship between the user and the system and in many cases now users and other users.

The most apparent user identity being the network identity which is carried through all computer-mediated exchanges. The most decipherable and only 'real life' meaningful piece of information that is directly conveyed by network identity, however, tends to be the physical location of the computer handling the exchanges of each participant. When a user utilises the Web Information System, the communication is conducted via the keyboard. The user can generally only be identified by their user id code. Although these codes provide few clues regarding the individuals identity, beyond the point of entry, time entered and existed and a trail of what they did within the system. Many mangers and techies may argue that the specific identity construction of the user is of little interest or use in more conventional information systems, oriented towards efficient high speed information processing for example. Social libitarians would also argue against Web information systems being able to attain such information as personal identity about the user. However in considering the users position the lack of cues available to navigate human computer and human to human via computer interaction as it currently stands can be described as stark, barren, sanitised and at its worst alienating. From the users perspective it could resonably be argued that it is time to humanise the computer-mediated experience. That rather than controlling the experience and presenting it as predominantly a mental experience where the body is left on the other side of the screen, that an enable more deliberate physical space be activated. In this way the user could conciously leave behind traces of their own identity and physically ground the experience.

An obvious and positive example of the attempts being made to establish identity in virtual space exist in the gendering of electronic space beyond the assumptions regarding one's personal name. In many interactive and virtual environments the individual is requested to ascribe themselves a name, and in effect, an identity. In this way the person can label themselves anything ranging from Erik Bloodaxe, the male hacker and editor of *2 600*, to Saint Jude, the outspoken on-line technofeminist, who utilises an ambiguously gendered (and curiously theologised) name, to the use of a favourite media character. The result is a 'fantastic' association of one's personal identity with the well-known images and social attributes of a famous person. Despite the paucity of this received information, these cues enable the participants in chat groups to choose who not to talk to and interact with. These personal acts of self identity are empowering in the mind/ body dichotomy as it is the ascription of physical cues that can reverse the domination of machine in the interactive space to a humanised experience.

Seeking cues regarding the identity of 'others' beyond a server's network address is a major activity of many chat groups. This generally involves trying to ascertain the gender, age and, sometimes, the ethnicity or education of the participants with a direct request. It is not beyond comprehension that a simple and if necessary automated process could be set up within a Web Information System to enable the system user to construct their own computer-mediated identity from which they could work or even simply interface with the system with. These parameters of identity and the gathering of this information corresponds, perhaps unsurprisingly, to many of the focal concerns of everyday sociological inquiry and serves to develop a range of social and power relations in virtual space which mirrors our more conventional experience (Gisler 1997; 219).

Transgressing existing conventional computer-mediated experiences provides the possibility for the formations of identity (Kendall 1996; 217). There are many urban legends associated with the direct manipulation of individual identity. One such example concerns the activities of a lesbian chat group.

> A group of self identifying lesbians formed to chat, share experiences and possibly strike up romantic associations. At another chat group, in another part of the Internet, a group of young men were bragging about their shared experiences in all women's and lesbian groups. Two began to tell how they had struck up a pretend romantic communication under their assumed gender identities. Shocked that the other's tale was turning out to be extremely similar one of the men asked the other what name he used. It turned out that their experiences had been very similar because they had been chatting each other up.

These urban legends portray the simplicity with which identity and, particularly, gender identity can be confused and manipulated in this social space. While, at the same time, this example reconfirms the anchorage of existent 'real life' identification cues with cyberspace and contextualises the story by highlighting that no other individuals in this particular group were sufficiently fooled to be duped. Further analysis would be required to ascertain if the culture of close knit virtual communities is such that imposters become obvious when they try to present themselves for affiliation.

Regardless of whether hidden cues exist in the exchanges of virtual space, the corporeal distancing that the screen provides prompts many individuals to do and say things that they would not usually attempt in a direct interpersonal situation. Turkle (1996) describes many situations in which individuals admit to conduct they would not normally (in RL) consider let alone carry

out. The physical disconnection of being 'logged in' however is not a new or yet to be experienced state. A similar sensation, an altered sense of being, exists in a number of situations. The reading of a book alters the sense of being, despite the unchanging physical presence of the reader the narrative can, at a different level, transport them anywhere. I utilise this analogy for the similarity that exists between the textual interconnectivity of the written text in both experiences. However, the sensation of altered being also occurs in the visual disassociation of watching television. This state or sensation is dramatically increased in a darkened room with surround sound and a big scene. In these examples the individual's RL identity is not challenged, although their sense of proximics is confused (Becker 1997; 211). Newer technology being brought to the Web potentially enables a range of devices which return the ability to receive the 'real life' cues of identity. The impetus to provide the full range of human senses to the experience of computer mediated space has concentrated heavily upon providing aural and visual information.

Cyberspace, in facilitating interaction without corporeality, does not reconstitute identities of 'real life'. This 'space without physicality' however, doubly emphasises the constructed basis of social distinction (Ostwald 1993; 17; Gumpert & Drucker 1994; 169). Significantly, however, the participant has a much clearer pro-active and on going role in these constructions to the near complete exclusion, if the participant so desires, of others (McRae 1996; 247). This ability presents the possibility for the articulation of a virtual persona that the user can feel comfortable with. An extreme aspect of this position would be to claim that the virtual persona is inevitable however ingnoring the empowering role Web Informatin Systems can play in this proposition has direct consequences on maintaining a continuing domination of mind over body in the experiences of computer mediated space. This is evidenced in the claim that a mirror of 'real life' physical features does not convey the same meaning in electronic space (Mitchell 1995; 73). The stories regarding active gender, identity construction have become too common to allow most experienced users of virtual space to accept continuing computer-mediated interaction to exist without the ablity to construct their own identity. However, without active and concious intergation into Web Information Systems development and implementation existing hegemonic power structures will continue and be perpretuated. Importantly Information Systems developers and researchers must acknowledge that the basis of electronic identity is founded upon the spatial context in which it is articulated.

Drawing on the popularity and success of chat groups and virtual communities examples of the importance of identity construction can and should be integrated into the ethos of Web Information Systems construction. By providing, within the Information System, identity cues the user can interact with other participants in a meaningful way. An interactive Web Information System in this way, can assist the user in identifying other users who share a common interest, therefore enabling unification of a community that is founded upon voluntary participation and common interest. The web pages, manuals and information files associated with each Web Information System produces a different context for the range of interaction and constructs that the user may experience. As a means of offering an alternative perspective to the writing which regards the physical exclusion of individuals from computer-mediated communications, it is suggested that once access can be gained into this space, and utility perceived for it, the processes by which identity is constructed can be a source of empowerment for Web Information Systems users. The Web is a medium that can assist in the breakdown or call into question the existence of essentialist and structuralist dichotomies associated with the mind and body, human and machine, masculine and feminine, public and private and reality and illusion. The technological determinist claims made for virtual space can also be countered within this reading. As an alternate suggestion to the claims that virtual space is predefined to privilege a mental experience, I argue that the extent and forms of existing identity construction experienced on-line indicates the extent to which the contemporary configurations of 'real life' impact upon virtual space. These considerations reject the inevitability of virtual space and the Web as a domain already defined by machine oriented functionality but rather one in which the processes of defining identity are, and may necessarily always be, shifting and continually reconstructed at both individual and institutional levels of interaction. Similarly, the expectation that personal identity in computer-mediated interaction is an almost expected outcome of obtaining access provides empowerment by enabling any opinion or philosophy to become an aspect of the social construction of the Web Information System and networked interaction *in toto*.

The importance of the usage of the mind/body dichotomy in maintaining structural inequalities is profoundly evident. While users identity is seen as inconsequential to the Web Information System, particularly under the premis of effeciency, effectiveness and efficacy the body and an association of physicality to computer-mediated experiences will continue to be marginalised in Information Systems construction. Equally while it is assumed that mental attributes provide advantages to acquisition of knowledge, and by implication the mind must be addressed over physical characteristics such as social cues and identity, a hierarchical order of mental hegemony will be maintained (Farganis 1986; 157). I have asserted that virtual space and the expansion of Information Systems development into Web Information Systems development allows a rethinking of the mind/body dichotomy because the processes of identity formation and sociality move beyond existing simple ascriptions. The ability to identify one's 'self' in virtual space and on the Web forces a reconsideration of the authority and legitimacy of conceptualisation of the mind and body as separable 'things'. The complex interplay of sociality that exists between people is similar, at a generalised level, within this space and those spaces of 'real life'. The difference of virtual space is evidenced in the differing

parameters applied to the construction of identity. The existent notions of identity construction that are associated with 'real life' have been mutually extended, reprioritised and recrafted. Popular representations of melded mind with machine - the cyborg - even in the most extreme situations do not reflect the experience of computer mediated identity construction and therefore should not be exported into the computer-mediated experience of a Web Information System.

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