

Ambiguous and Stereotypical Identity Formation at the Margins of Cyberspace: Viewing the Urban Spatial Form of the Internet as a Theme Park

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Recent speculation concerning the relationship between architecture and the body in virtual environments has focussed on the way in which identity has the capacity to become fluid. Without conventional physical constraints it is possible for a person in virtual space to choose to present a persona that is dramatically different to their own. This realisation has led theorists to depict cyberspace environments as places of extreme freedom and personal expression; a reading which has been extrapolated to suggest that the associated virtual architectural and urban environments must be similarly fluid. This paper argues that, contrary to popular thought, the body is often not entirely fluid in virtual space and that it loses individuality and migrates towards stereotypical roles. The key to this understanding is present in the way in which people react in marginal urban spaces of the real world; particularly in that most simulated of conventional urban spaces, the theme park. Observations of the way in which stereotype identities are promoted in both physical and virtual theme parks support the thesis of the paper.

SPACE AND IDENTITY

In Urban Theory there has been a gradual growth in understanding the manner in which certain cultural spaces promote the loss, or misreading, of identity. From 19th century cross-dressing on the Parisian Boulevard¹ to the 20th century loss of individuality in planned suburbs there has arisen a recognition that certain kinds of communal spaces act as catalysts for fluid identity.² Internet culture and spatiality has been linked to historical urban models of community from the salons of the 18th century to the 20th century shopping mall.³ In each case urban models have acted as a lens through which Internet culture may be examined.⁴ This paper is concerned with the manner in which self-proclaimed Internet theme parks promote ambiguous readings of identity. Drawing from critical theory, which has considered the theme park as a space which promotes the loss of individual identity, this chapter will consider the fluid nature of projected personae in the margins of the Internet. Specifically the idea that theme parks promote the absence of individual

identity will be tested for those areas of the Internet which acknowledge this ancestry.

The capacity for identity, to be either fixed or fluid, is linked to the way in which the individual is prompted, by the characteristics of the space, to alter their projected persona. This implies that certain spatial forms act as catalysts for electronic cross-dressing and the projection of false personae while other spatial forms accentuate the existing identity.⁵ An alternative reading of the fluctuating systems of identity, in both real and virtual environments, is to see the shifts in identity in terms of the degree of individuality which they promote. A space which encourages the rights of the individual to self-expression and self-determination is usually a space which is said to actively promote singular identity. This may be contrasted with a space that actively produces identity which is stereotypical or manufactured. In the first case the individual is advanced while in the latter some controlled, and frequently false, identity is projected.

Three spatial forms may, as an example, be contrasted which act as catalysts for the changing status of identity. In the first, the individual is projecting an active personality when they inhabit a space for purely personal motivations. The individual's own home or office may be as idiosyncratic as the manner in which they use Email or the Internet. The peripatetic "netsurfer" is an exemplar of this approach; they present an active imago which resists the blurring of identity. While the individual using the Internet, or their own living room, presents particular characteristics that same person, while attending a sporting event or observing an on-line academic debate, may be temporarily subsumed within the identity of the group. In this second spatial context the person is not actively presenting an individual identity rather, they are presenting a group persona. This is a passive projection of group identity as the individual is partially or wholly lost. The third example of spatial impact on identity is the focus of this paper. Spatial forms exist in the real world wherein the individual may seem to be acting alone however they effectively, because of the nature of the space, are promoting the absence of identity. One example in the real world of this type of space is the shopping mall wherein the people

inhabiting the space seem to be following individual aims and objectives however the simulated and confusing nature of the space causes the individual subject to suffer “mal-dé-mall”; the state wherein confusion and loss of individual identity occurs through sensory overload. Similarly the theme parks of the physical world promote the loss of identity through a series of techniques including the production of fantasy and through enticing visitors to change their own identities during their stay. The theme park is also spatially significant in that it is an urban spatial form (albeit from the margins of the city) which the Internet has attempted to mimic relatively closely. For this reason the theme park, both in the real and virtual the world is a fertile ground to consider the way in which identity is manufactured and then induced to a fluid state in virtual environments.

PHYSICAL THEME PARKS

In 1897 George Tilyou erected a walled enclosure around his Steeplechase ride on Coney Island. This act of enclosing space and limiting entry to his rides was possibly the first act of definition, spatially, of the theme park. Tilyou had a vision of a new kind of space where all of the world would be on display. Tilyou recorded his obsession in his notes at the time: “If Paris is France, Coney Island, between June and September, is the World.”⁶ In an early and unconscious attempt to produce a Postmodern spatial form Tilyou discovered that through the construction of simulacra he could condense time and distance thus producing a completely simulated and controlled experience.

Such was the success of Steeplechase Park that a few years later on Coney Island Frederick Thompson opened Luna Park. Here the concept behind the enclosed space relied upon the idea of producing an entirely simulated spatial experience wherein all visitors could become travellers through outer space. Luna Park was to be “‘not of this earth’ but part of the Moon.” Visitors to Luna Park were turned “into astronauts in a conceptual airlock” from which they travelled to the moon.⁷ In Luna Park, the production of a fantasy setting, where all things are possible, is coupled with the idea that all visitors are treated as if they were playing the roles of astronauts. The third New York theme park, Dreamland, opened within a few years of Steeplechase Park and Luna Park buoyed by the success of the first two. Dreamland featured a number of attractions which departed from the formulas employed by the previous parks but ultimately reinforcing the simple strategies developed on Coney Island. Instead of having just one environment, as displayed in Luna Park, Dreamland featured replica sections of various historical events such that time as well as space could be folded and twisted. Reynolds’ rhizomorphic spatial structure included a partial reconstruction of Pompeii, complete with simulated eruptions on the hour. The three Coney Island spaces defined the basal characteristics of almost all theme parks from that moment onwards until the late eighties when technology was suffi-

ciently advanced to propose an even more detailed simulation of space and identity.

In the United Kingdom, in 1984, a proposal was made for stage one of WonderWorld, a theme park on an unprecedented scale. WonderWorld had a singular gimmick which it used to distance itself from other theme parks. This gimmick was most clearly displayed in certain sections of the theme park where visitors would be encouraged to cast aside their everyday identities and to take on the costumes, characteristics and motives of famous characters from fiction. The images that accompanied this proposal suggested that people could become the Nine Walkers in Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings* or take up Sherlock Holmes’ pipe and cape and live out Conan Doyle’s fiction. WonderWorld sought to allow a visitor to leave behind their own identities and to replace these, while within the theme park, with the identity of a fictional character or a form of character stereotype. WonderWorld aimed to erase the real world identity of the visitor and replace it with a non-identity; a world where all people are simulated entities, striving to retain conformity rather than difference.⁸

In each of these four theme parks the idea of participation and role-playing is central to the definition of the space. By acting as an astronaut, a wizard or an office worker the visitors were able to leave behind their own identities and become part of a counterfeit world. The more identities which could be exchanged in one day the more people seemed to enjoy the experience. The emphasis on fear and feats of heroism can also not be ignored. At the core of Steeplechase Park was an electronic horse racing track on which visitors could ride equine automata and compete for actual winnings. The key scene from WonderWorld’s simulation of Tolkein was the battle between the forces of good and forces of evil; competition was intrinsic to the plan. Everywhere in the theme park the idea of death defying competition is emphasised. By participating in the spatial experience of the theme park the visitor is accepting and even welcoming the idea that they are becoming part of a fictional existence. The loss of identity allows the visitor to escape temporarily their fears and frustrations. Elizabeth Wilson described the theme park spatial form as a form of dystopic culture: “a kind of infantile paradise cleansed of all adult emotions or concerns.”⁹

There is a final aspect of the theme park which has remained constant over the last 100 years and that is the effect that constantly fluctuating state of personal identity has on the visitor. In 1907 when the writer and critic Maxim Gorky visited Coney Island he observed presciently that the “visitor is stunned; his consciousness is withered by the intense gleam; his thoughts are routed from his mind; he becomes a particle in the crowd.”¹⁰ The visitor to the physical theme park undergoes a reduction in individuality. Theme parks are planned not about people but about cues, lines, and minimum carriage capacities. The visitor to Disneyland is not a single person; they are an aimless crowd, a train, or a queue of people. As Gorky noted the visitor to the theme park

is partially erased by the multiple layering of simulation and the fluid nature of identity. The fantasy scenes enacted repetitiously for the visitors to the theme park do not affirm the presence of difference: in effect they confirm the absence of it. The question then is; do the Internet theme parks act as catalysts for the loss of individuality in the same way as the real world spatial model? And if they do might this suggest that identity in virtual environments is not so fluid as has been previously argued.¹¹ In order to answer this question the manner in which two forms of Internet theme parks encourage fluid identity will be briefly considered. The two Internet theme park spaces are the MUDs (generally textual environments) and The Sierra Network (TSN) (a graphical environment).

VIRTUAL THEME PARKS.

The term MUD has variously been used to describe Multiple-User Dimensions, Multiple-User Dungeons and Multiple-User Dialogues. A MUD is a form of real-time simulation of a "role-playing game" using the Internet to link many thousands of users simultaneously. Conventional MUDs are text based environments which offer a first person description of a space using language to evoke a sense of place. A person entering a MUD would be conventionally greeted with a description of the large scale topography of the location they are entering. A typical description might be: "You are on a narrow road between the Land and whence you came. To the north and south are the small foothills of a pair of majestic mountains. To the west a line of smoke may be seen. To the east a long dark bank of clouds covers a small forested glade in darkness." The user could then type the word "west" and they would move towards the west and be greeted with a new description on screen. "A small thatched roofed cottage sits next to a low stone wall. A thin line of smoke rises from its chimney. From inside a woman's voice may be heard." Through this sequence of textual descriptions a spatial experience is evoked. Despite this simplistic description, MUDs contain an additional dimension; in a MUD the people that the user meets and converses with are frequently real people who have connected to the same location from their own computers and terminals, from almost anywhere in the world. It is this ability to meet and interact with real people which has allowed the MUDs to be successful at simulating spatial experience.

There are many types of MUDs and the distinction between each sort is rarely clear-cut or definitive. Various MUDs which use the prefix, "Tiny," or "Teeny" are often social gatherings that are formed about communal structures reminiscent of extended families or tribes. MOOs, including the famous LambdaMOO, are often academic spaces for the exploration of NET activities. Rheingold in, *The Virtual Community* aptly described MUDs as places "where magic is real and identity is a fluid."¹² Like the real world theme park MUDs are places wherein the normal restrictions of life do not apply. Probably the most obvious area in which the

conventional barriers between fantasy and reality breakdown are in the area of personal identity. The first MUDs were forms of interactive real-time story-telling. They concentrated on producing simulated experiences derived from popular fantasy literature. The first MUD, produced in 1979, was firmly anchored in the role-playing tradition in Britain in that it relied upon people assuming the identities of heroic fantasy figures. It is the manner in which the MUD encourages a space of fluctuating identities which provides a central idea to understanding the relationship between MUDs and theme parks. In the average MUD the individual assumes an identity which is not their own and participates in a form of competition for power with other real or simulated parties. In order to enter this type of competitive MUD the participant had to select a persona, or design one from a series of options. Typical options include choosing either male or female sex, and a range of professions for the characters (thief, assassin, knight, magician, etc). Rheingold states that:

Once inside a MUD, you can be a man or a woman or something else entirely. You can be a hive identity. ... Identity is the first thing you create in a MUD. You have to decide the name of your alternate identity — what MUDDers call your character."¹³

Like the theme park, the MUD relies upon the combined agencies of simulation, competition, fear and fluid identity. The early MUDs, in the mode of WonderWorld, encouraged their visitors to accept characters which were stereotypes or based upon literary characters. Recent MUDs and MOOs are far less restrictive in this sense; in particular accounts of MOO characteristics suggest that the object orientated programming code allows quite elaborate expressions of individuality.¹⁴

Returning to the competitive role-playing MUDs, character generation is still a controlled process using strict guidelines concerning the abilities of the new character. For example, one MUD might decide that a person's quantifiable attributes may be classified into five areas; strength, agility, mental powers, faith and charisma. In addition each of these characteristics is set between a range of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very strong). The first time visitor to the MUD would then be given 15 points to split amongst these five attributes thus giving the appearance of designing their new identity. Yet, instead of producing genuine diversification of personality types the most successful MUDDers tended to conform to particular stereotypes. While the character may seem to be an original and singular persona it is likely, given the MUD system, that there are a number of almost identical characters in the same virtual space. In this context there are distinct similarities in the manner in which theme parks and MUDs promote forms of fluid identity.

Consider a final example of an Internet theme park, The Sierra Network (TSN). Sierra's gaming and education network is centred about a graphical user environment and the passage of information throughout the Internet. TSN uses a system of on-screen text and graphics, some of which may

be manipulated, to simulate their theme park spatially. The centrepiece of TSN is the “cyberspace theme park,” ImagiNation. Pictorially ImagiNation is displayed as a form of fantasy “town with a map of services and attractions.”¹⁵ Navigation around the community of ImagiNation in TSN is by way of a combination of icons and text. Places which may be visited include a Town Hall, Post Office, Mall, and Help (a corner store with a blue striped awning). The themed locations, MedievaLand, LarryLand (a Las Vegas style casino environment) and SierraLand are clustered around the community forming locus points for visitors.

TSN, as with any theme park, is centred around the idea of personal illusion - it aims to produce an environment where nothing is what it seems. The visitor to TSN could equally well stumble across a “world class chess master” masquerading as a novice or a celebrity in disguise attempting to relax in cyberspace. At all times Sierra’s designers wanted visitors to their theme park to be confronted with the idea that anything is possible and that game playing, competing and being excited or afraid, is a legitimate exercise. In the real world theme parks entry to the space is customarily defined though the creation of a portal or gate. Passage through this gate is gradual to allow the visitor to slowly loose contact with the outside world. While this transition is accomplished symbolically in the real world, it occurs more directly in the MUDs and TSN. TSN presents the newcomer with a special feature called the FaceMaker. This device allows the visitor to choose how they will be graphically displayed to others entering the virtual space. An identikit type feature provides the visitor with a choice of hair styles, noses, eyes, mouths or skin colors from on-screen graphics. In the MUDs the individual is presented with a textual description while in TSN the user appears as a static portrait or personal icon. This icon acts as a signifier for fluid identity; it is the graphical manifestation of a presented persona.

Significantly Kurt Busch described using the FaceMaker as a process which involves selecting a stock character.

TSN provides a number of stock characters for the novice ... The first screen allows you to select name, race, guild, sex, and alignment for your character. Up to six characters can be stored in your account, but only one can be played at a time. ... Creating your appearance is one of the more fun aspects of the process. It’s also one of the most important, since you’re creating the image others will see when they click on your name. ... Clothing includes elven forest garb, wizards robes, and heavy armor. There are also options for head cover, eye color, and facial hair (or veils for women).¹⁶

Busch’s description of TSN contains a number of references which are consequential to any argument concerning fluid identity in theme park type spaces. Notably Busch described the process of developing a persona as choosing from a selection of stock characters. The implication of this is that, like the proposal for WonderWorld, the visitor does

not necessarily become a new person, rather their own personality is replaced with a two dimensional character suited to specific tasks. A final curiosity in Busch’s description is the selection system for clothing and facial features. After reading Busch’s description many questions beg to be asked. Can a visitor wear a veil and be male? Can a veil be worn over a beard? Can a female character have a veil and a beard? The answer to all of these is—of course not, it’s not encouraged. All of these variations are usually impossible, the characters promoted are stereotypes, not individuals. TSN, unlike many MUDs, is ultimately closely aligned to Walt Disney’s utopian ideals. The characters are carefully controlled and conform to commonplace images; the stereotype personae themselves encourage further stereotypical speech and actions. TSN, like the Disney theme parks in the real world, is a sanitised moderated space; identity is controlled despite the appearance of flexibility.

CONCLUSIONS.

In urban design and planning any spatial theory is usually linked to a particular model of urban form. The theory of community interaction and cultural growth in New York is not the same as that which could be used to describe a shopping mall or a theme park. Although many theories have a degree of currency in multiple locations few are able to be applied simultaneously to both the body of a field and to its margins. In the Internet there is a growing need to study the ways in which communities are forming and using electronic spatial evocations. However there is also a need to look at developing theories that are space specific and which may be used to differentiate between areas. This paper has identified a number of similarities between the ways in which real world and Internet theme parks promote the break down in identity. The study of real world theme parks seems to provide a number of useful tools which may be used to dissect the fluid nature of identity in the margins of the Internet and primitive cyberspace.

Despite these general findings it is clear that not all MUDs and not all areas of TSN are explicitly theme park spaces yet many promote the same stereotypical range of personas. The Internet theme park is a place where people go to be (un)seen; a space of anonymity. The theme park provides the ultimate environment wherein fantasy replaces reality; where the visitor may rise briefly above the mundane and become a hero, a princess, or a favourite character from fiction. Whether the goal is to lose personal identity completely or to be someone else entirely the outcome is the same—the theme park breaks down the conventional real world influences which effect the visitor’s projected personality. The real and the virtual theme parks exerts a zone of influence which mitigates against retention of individual identity.

NOTES

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