Tobey Crockett

Fun, Love, and Happiness — or The Aesthetics of Play and Empathy in Avatar Worlds

Tobey Crockett
University of California at Irvine
4457 Boston Avenue
La Crescenta, California 91214 USA
tcrockett@earthlink.net

I was asked recently why I would be interested in theorizing on play outside of the context of games and persistent environments. The answer has to do with the processes of creativity, self expression, and authorship that arise when we consider interactivity in virtual worlds. Artmaking as play, and empathy as a foundation of collective authorship, are the central themes of this talk. But is that art? If one allows that art is an outgrowth of a set of techniques, tools, conventions, visual histories, aesthetic vocabularies, and above all an urge of creative self-expression then we would have to say yes. If, additionally, we posit that the digital medium may, perhaps, bring with it a special quality that we have not yet pinned down, despite various efforts to do so, then I would like to suggest that that special digital quality is reflected precisely in aesthetics of play, empathy, and a sense of collective identity and multiplicity of authorship.

I have earlier discussed the idea of the computer as dollhouse as a way to focus on 3D virtual worlds. I chose these worlds as a platform because I observe that interactivity can be explored more fully here than it can in other arenas of the Web. My own interest in interactivity started in the 1980s in the art world of New York, where I was increasingly drawn to artwork intended to be shared with large numbers of people, not just as viewers, but as envisioned and empowered participants. I was interested then, as now, in artists who saw the audience as necessary co-creators and completers of the artwork. Rituals, performance, and interventions into public spaces were for a time very common in the East Village and Lower East Side — events that harkened back to earlier artists such as Allan Kaprow and Happenings, the international network of Fluxus artists, the art and culture interventions of Joseph Beuys, and the Situationists in Paris, to name only a few. As Lev Manovich has noted, there are quite a number of authors, himself included, who look to art history to explain a variety of phenomena that are now resurfacing in the guise of the new digital media.

With this art historical framework in mind, I had the good luck to become a student under cyberphilosopher Dr. Michael Heim at the Art Center College of Design. The Art Center team had previously developed a virtual world in the ActiveWorlds 3D browser, a world called ACCD, in which we began to do some serious probing of the limitations and possibilities of avatar worlds. Together, we created an event series called CyberForum@ArtCenter where we hosted live in-world author chats with various digital theorists. I will discuss these events in more detail later. ACCD spawned another world from the Art Center teams — VWD; and I myself have developed a small world, TCWF, which stands for Tobey Crockett's Wild Frontier.

By definition, avatar worlds are 3D spaces shared in real time over the Internet, worlds in which our agency is represented by an avatar. I am interested in non-narratively driven worlds, worlds that function as creative play spaces for self expression. These worlds can be found in browsers such as ActiveWorlds, which has two universes, including one for educational purposes. Other formats include Adobe Atmosphere, which is a tool for publishing online 3D spaces. Other environments do exist, such as CyberTown in Blaxxun or some of the worlds from Worlds Inc., but they have an more of an emphasis on their own narrative structures and limitations, which are not pertinent for our purposes here.

Notions of play and childhood may be argued as arising from a complex of social constructions heavily indebted to the 19th century. We might think more about how reality itself also arises as a construction indebted to play, a social system within which we are heavily entrained from birth. Psychologist David Winnicott, in his groundbreaking book, *Playing and Reality* (1971) describes the role of the toy as a transitional object that allows the infant to ascertain that there is indeed a world out there beyond baby and mother. The toy is the first evidence of the world, creating a transition for the baby and pointing the way to inner and outer, public and private, self and other which is part of our essential tool box for functioning in this material plane. Through toys and playing we forge relationships with a material reality that we discover is at least partially under our control. Of interest to me is the way in which we enact the same kind of relationship with reality construction in the highly specific instances of virtual world interactivity and world building. The avatar is the transitional object of cyberspace, helping us to learn what is "us," what is "not us, and about the new reality of cyberspace.

Moving from child development to the nature of interactivity, we can ask: while interactivity is often defined as relating to a human/computer interface (HCI), what does it mean if we instead give primacy to a peer-to-peer (P2P) relationship? Peer-to-peer is an autonomous technological connection between humans enabled, rather than subsumed, by the computer interface. With peer to peer, we can explore a model of inter activity predicated upon the empathetic resonance between co-creators. Just as contemporary literary theories supplant the hierarchy of author/reader with a new model of distributed authority, so too the distributed architecture of creative authority in virtual worlds posits reception as characterized by active co-creation and interactive participation. When the definitions of reception and audience are thus expanded in the digital context to encompass mutual participation amongst co-creators, what we term a kind of play, it enables us to consider further some important ethical and aesthetic issues related to virtual worlds and interactivity.

One way such ethical and empathetic issues are raised is through the switching of points of view allowed in some, but not all, browsers. By seeing out of the "camera eye" as we see out of our real eyes, we imitate the eye as camera sensibility rehearsed so well in film and first person shooters. But in third person, we may also see ourselves distributed among the crowd with whom we are "hanging." Sometimes we are all in the same avatar and you can hardly tell where you are in the group, until you see the text over your head. In this way, the experience offers an opportunity to discover a new sort of empathy, for when I meet someone else wearing the avatar I usually assume, I have a warmer feeling for them. "Oh you like the penguin, too!" This seemingly small detail about ease of POV relocation broaches significant philosophical issues about the dialectics of posthumanism: self/other, inner/outer, public/private, real/Memorex. The transitional nature of the avatar I mentioned earlier allows us to partially resolve these conflicts.

Turning to authorship and aesthetics in virtual worlds, let us keep in mind these topics of play and empathy. Unlike in a one-way, top-down hierarchical architecture, interactive approaches require a deconstructed "toy box," an authoring kit with which participants can create stories of their own invention. They can take advantage of the distributed nature of avatar worlds—its hyperspace—to produce narratives with multiple threads and what could be seen as omnidirectional flow, rather than one-way reception. Current authoring kits used by ordinary users tend to be rather limited. There are plenty of game-mod artists having fun, but what about the rest of us? Game-based and role playing authoring

kits, with their narrative-heavy agendas, do not allow ordinary users much freedom of aesthetic choice, as all the options are necessarily weighted to the specifics of the particular story arc. Contrast this problem with the nature of avatar worlds in which there is rarely if ever any kind of narrative structure to constrain the authors, and where the visual building materials for ordinary users are often too much involved with replicating the real world to allow for much fantasy. Truth be told, this can sometimes lead to the boring world in which there is little to find entertaining. Could there be a middle ground between these two types of authoring situations?

Many fresh ideas about interactive media technologies can be discovered in the current confines of avatar worlds. Certainly the introduction of better authoring kits intended as genuinely artistic tools for more ordinary users will enable the creation of more self expressive and unique 3D environments intended for multiple users. As an extension of the peer-to-peer psychology, being invited to visit, chat and share files in some-one's 3D Web space complete with all their favorite music, pictures of family, special interests and links is a highly likely outcome, resulting in a widespread use and familiarity with 3D spaces linked online. Applications include community building, collaborative learning environments, artistic realms, self-expressive skill building, psychosocial therapeutic and multiple commercial uses.

Notions about the purposefulness of play well established in Victor Turner and the importance of multiple voices in the carnivalesque borrowed from Bakhtin give us insight into the somewhat chaotic realm of serious play in avatar worlds. To cite one example from 1999-2001, I participated in the CyberForum@ArtCenter author events I mentioned earlier. The theorists addressed topics applicable to the development of digital culture. In these events, not only was there serious discussion, but there were also organized rituals, and frequent chaotic interventions. While the topics were unquestionably fielded by Heim and his notable guests, the loose hierarchy of the virtual worlds encouraged spontaneous development of new ideas and often led to unexpected group discoveries.

It almost goes without saying that the main discovery, interactivity in virtual worlds, is the way a sense of telepresence and play turns out to be a highly collective experience in direct contrast to the conventional Western paradigm of individual performance. Jokes, rowdiness, outsiders barging in without a clue, the occasional problems with speakers who did not grasp the quasi-"talk show" atmosphere, flirtation, and general fooling around with the interface were all a necessary and often highly productive part of the events. Accidents, complaints, and outsiders were often the greatest contributors to our discoveries of fresh potentials inworld, and this contributes strongly to the playful, spontaneous, and fluid qualities which distinguish the virtual environment. But I believe this would not have worked without a genuine sense of empathy, expressed as a team spirit, camraderie, and clarity about our goals shared amongst the main players and repeat participants. It was a particular combination of factors, but ones that are replicable in my opinion.

In the CyberForum events it quickly became clear that in order to more fully explore the potential not only for chat but also for avatar movement, we needed to develop a new approach to the embodiment of avatar worlds. We developed the idea of the "avatar ritual," and explored many forms of virtual performance that allowed us to connect not just textually, but also telepresently with our guests. For example, with guest speaker Niranjan Rajah, we discovered that a design flaw in my Pinkie avatar could be exploited in a fun way to try to exchange body parts in a kind of dance with one another. We called this the "Pinkie Dance," and many of us agreed that this playful interaction produced some of the greatest feeling of actual presence in cyberspace that any of us had ever experienced. As game designers already know, the psychological investment in play can be very profound, with direct implications for telepresence; and of course, it is much more fun to play with others than to play by yourself. These playful avatar rituals broke the limitations of chat and allowed us to explore, and in some cases bridge, the dualistic limits of inner and outer, public and private, and self and other in ways which were unexpected and sometimes even emotionally satisfying to the participants involved, most of whom were in such remote locations as Malaysia, Sweden, India, Italy, England and various parts of the *United States*.

Even before questions of avatar performance could be addressed, however, the topic of architecture had already led previous ACCD teams to develop an unusual and surreal architectural vocabulary. Just as real world architecture and aesthetics significantly impact the types of behaviors and activities of real world humans, so too virtual architecture in avatar worlds impacts the ways in which avatars use space to interact with one another. Virtual worlds which attempt to replicate the real world as we know it are often dull and boring to visit, with too few "play" opportunities to allow avatars to interact with one another. This reflects the problems of attempting to translate one set of rules developed in response to physical constraints to an environment that has its own set of nonphysical constraints, often leading to frustrating worlds experiences for avatars.

Prevailing concerns about realism, i.e. that visitors to virtual worlds will not be able to navigate well in an alien environment, unfortunately often lead to the strip mall-like development of browsers such as ActiveWorlds. Issues of illusionism still tend to dominate the aesthetic questions foundational to future virtual reality developments, and the often unsuccessful aesthetics of current virtual worlds often mislead critics to believe that nothing relevant occurs in these new cyberspaces. This may well be a matter of introducing a better visual vocabulary, rather than an inherent limitation of the design tools *per se*. On the other hand, worlds that are developed with "case-sensitive" ideas about providing virtually appropriate activities and gathering places for avatars are often more successful. Just as in any other art form, the more the world builder acknowledges the specific constraints of the world browser in which s/he is building, the better the result.

In virtual worlds, where we build and play at will, we co-opt the role of author that creates our world. This, combined with the empathy that arises from our visual cloning, generates emotional investment in the immateriality of cyberspace. The word "avatar," from the Sanskrit, means to cross down into. Cyberspace is not up there in heaven or outer space, all deferences to Margaret Wertheim and Hans Moravec. When we "cross down into" cyberspace and our avatar, we bring a whole set of constructs down here with us at our own virtual level. There is a responsibility inherent in such a notion, and as many digital artists ranging from Natalaie Jeremijenko of the Bureau of Inverse Technology to Steve Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble tell us, we are creating our own digital culture and cannot abjure reponsibility to some outside agency for what goes on here.

During a Gender and Technology panel at UC Irvine this spring, anthropologist Dr. Victoria Bernal said in her observations of Internet use in the cybercafes of Eritrea that there is a definite collaborative dynamic as several people team together to explore the net. Mutual teaching, English language sharing, and the devising of strategies are all part of this collective experience. "Maybe the individual is not the primary interest in a transglobal subjectivity," she said. My own observations about play in virtual worlds strongly support this notion. The invest-

ment in an individual heroic figure of cultural production may be a myth whose time has past.

For future exploration, it would be fruitful to remember that there are already models of collective identity and creative collaboration that stand in stark contrast to the Western paradigm of maverick genius and its persistent sidekick, intellectual property. Such a multiple subject is recognizable to theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, Bakhtin, and many others, including numerous scholars of Buddhist philosophy, such as Robert Thurman and even the Dalai Lama. In a variety of Asian cultural models for instance, the act of so-called originality is less valued than the ability to manifest an already established mastery over known constraints; it is not "the shock of the new," so much as the contribution to the "commons" from which others may learn to emulate good and beautiful uses. A sense of modularity and the development of a re-combinatory vocabulary are widespread. Indeed, in many cultures and time periods, the recycling of stylistic elements, narratives, ornamentation, and structural devices in order to demonstrate mastery, and to enrich and enliven a cultural discourse rooted in a traditional heritage, is in fact the norm.

As artist and curator Antoinette La Farge suggested to me recently, the history of art is fraught with collaboration, from the great painter with a slew of assistants to the film industry. Add today's diminished claims for authorship, and a new sense of the collective and collaborative gains authority. This can only occur where there is a sense of flow, looseness, and participation, where respect and mutual reciprocity is a dominant characteristic. While it by no means characterizes all inworld situations or exchanges, it can and does occur, as repeat performances of the CyberForum@ArtCenter were able to demonstrate.

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These are just a few examples of the aesthetic concerns raised in con-sidering avatar worlds as places of co-creation and participation. It is only by making 3D authoring tools accessible to a broader audience that we will be able to better understand what we mean when we talk about collaborative environments. We will have to evolve a set of aes-thetic theories that allow us to assign creative roles to the behaviors of play and empathy that emerge as characteristic of virtual environments. Aesthetic avatar play allows us, at least some of the time, to address the perceptual nature of embodiment in virtual worlds, psychological investment in telepresence, rules by which we may successfully collab-orate at a distance, appropriate behavior for discussion and remote learning situations, nonverbal cues for communication, and what it means to share a collective identity.