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The Experience of Embodied Space in Virtual Worlds

An Ethnography of a Second Life Community

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The article examines the mutually constituted relations among avatars, space, and artifacts represented in a Gorean community in Second Life. Combining virtual ethnography (i.e., participant observations and in-depth interviews) with the growingly important concept of experience design in human–computer interaction, the authors explore and unpack the spatial experiences of participants in the community and, with them, the grammar and symbolism of power and submission, of private and public, and consider body as a place for social inscription. The spatial experiences of these participants shed light on the nature of this community (both social and computer-mediated interactions) and help explain why virtual simulation of Gorean fantasy is such a compelling form of play and source of intimacy and emotion for thousands of Second Life residents.

Keywords: space; place; body; embodiment; interaction; experience; Second Life

Though the multiuser virtual environment (MUVE) Second Life gained sudden media acclaim in 2006, the game-like space has existed since 2003. At the time of this writing, Second Life had more than 8 million active accounts, 50,000 of which were in-world at any given time. Second Life is interesting in that it is a participant-created virtual world, which means that nearly every element in its world—waterfall, house, skirt, truck, and art installation—was created by a Second Life user.

One of the more visible phenomena has been the ever-growing presence of Gorean communities—virtual simulations of fantasy novels of Gor written by John Norman in the 1970s. Set in a fantasy time, these novels describe a stratified Greco-Roman-like

culture with a sophisticated social structure that dictates roles and actions of its citizens and focalizes men's dominance over women, often played out in the context of fetish sex (bondage, dominance/submission, and sadomasochist, or BDSM). The increasingly compelling participant-created animations and visuals of these environments also provide high-quality stimulation and immersion for those who participate in them (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2007). One of the most interesting characteristics of Gorean implementations in Second Life is their success in creating and maintaining highly complex, yet stable, virtual communities. Thus, however one feels about their practices, they are of interest because of what they can potentially teach us about virtual communities in 3D computer-mediated environments.

In this article, we report results from a 6-month study of a Gorean community in Second Life, following residents who simulate the novels of Gor with a particular focus on the education of *kajirae* (i.e., slaves, submissives) in the Gorean society. The particular Gorean community (one of many) we studied is *Ithaca* (note that we changed the name to protect the anonymity of its participants). We explore participants' experiences with space and the Gorean culture by combining virtual ethnography with recent experiential approaches to HCI (human-computer interaction) to understand how participant-created environments enable the cultivation of a sophisticated subculture and how such personal and cultural experiences are made meaningful and powerful through settings, events, and artifacts created and used by the community members. As our study of Ithaca demonstrates, it is evident that both space and place are culturally produced, and they are in turn integral in the making of its virtual culture and community.

HCI, initially concerned with user performance and efficiency, is increasingly branching out to investigate more subjective dimensions of computing use. Extending the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey and the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, John McCarthy and Peter Wright (2004), in *Technology as Experience*, explored the emotional and aesthetic dimensions of one's encounter with technology and proposed a four-part framework to understand the subjective experience of technology:

- *The sensual thread*: the concrete and visceral aspect of an experience
- *The emotional thread*: the affective dimension of an experience
- *The compositional thread*: the sequence of actions in an experience
- *The spatial-temporal thread*: the setting and temporality of an experience

These four threads are offered as a potential analytical lens to unpack the complex phenomenon of *subjective experience*. For this study, we were particularly interested in the fourth thread, the spatiotemporal thread. McCarthy and Wright (2004) characterized this thread not in terms of objective space and time but rather, following Bakhtin, in terms of how space and time seem to be cocreated alongside cultural experience. That is, actions, artifacts, possibilities, and identities are mutually constituted with the spaces and times in which they occur. In their analysis, McCarthy and Wright applied this exploration of subjective space largely to 2D computer interfaces. We wondered how a study of 3D computer interfaces might affect this analysis because 3D interfaces such as Second Life are more environment than tool because users are more obviously embodied (in avatars) and because MUVes are more social than most 2D interfaces. To address this question, we examine how space and place shape Ithaca citizens' understanding and interaction with the 3D immersive virtual Gorean simulation in which they reside.

Although in colloquial English, "space" is often used interchangeably with "place," theorization on space and place offers a distinction. "Space" is comparatively more

abstract, empirical, and objective, whereas “place” is defined by the lived experiences of those who inhabit them (Hubbard, Kitchin, & Valentine, 2004). We transform a space into a place by structuring it, forging emotional attachment to it, and creating meaning to it (Tuan, 1976). A place is subjective, individualistic, and means different things to different people; above all, it is often the locus of social interaction and power dynamics (Massey, 1995, cited in Hubbard et al., 2004).

Online simulations, such as Ithaca’s Gorean implementation in Second Life, are rich areas for research into the complex social dynamics of place and space online. Because nobody can accurately and perfectly reproduce Norman’s novels as a virtual world simulation, the making of a community such as Ithaca reflects a communal interpretation of the fictional narratives, an interpretation that unfolds over time, unfolds in places, and is ripe for conflict. Indeed, all of the many Gorean communities in Second Life emphasize different interpretations of the novels and articulate different emphases for their communities.

In the case of Ithaca, the emphasis is on education, in particular the education of slaves, and is comparatively less about unbridled Gorean role-play. It bills itself to potential participants as offering a high-quality education for would-be Gorean slaves, a place to cultivate Gorean values in a safe and respectful haven. Because learning is the core value of Ithaca, it drives social mores and influences the construction of its unique landscape. For example, Ithaca features a dedicated educational facility, in which participants learn from a well-planned and carefully designed curriculum, with hands-on participation from the community’s most exalted leaders. Many Gorean implementations lack dedicated educational facilities and instead offer training in more ad hoc environments.

In the setting of Ithaca, the citizens perform their day-to-day activities in prescribed roles and in various situated contexts. The conduct and behaviors of Ithaca citizens are highly stylized, made meaningful by the places they are in (e.g., tavern, bathhouse, forge, slave kennels, jungles, etc.). Relying on virtual ethnography, we studied how people used and thought about the spaces in which they participated, and we paid special attention to the role of avatars as bodies in these spaces.

Research Method

In this study, we principally rely on virtual ethnography, including participant observation and interviews with informants, to investigate how space and place are constructed on both individual and community levels. Although we remain strongly influenced by previous work on virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2000; Turkle, 1995), our multisited ethnographic approach is equally informed by contemporary anthropological practice (Marcus, 1995). Drawing on a pragmatic perspective of artifacts (Dewey, 1934) and a combined pragmatic and semiotic approach to domestic research (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981), we examine the role of artifacts as playing an essential role in the interpretive sign process and development of meaning. This study, taking place between February and July 2007, is part of a larger research project investigating emergent Gorean identity, culture, and community online.

Our central unit of analysis is the particular setting within Ithaca. Throughout the course of our study, we conducted participant observation in various public areas including the bathhouse, tavern, and learning center. Group events in these areas were predominantly educational, typically involving courses instructed by senior Ithaca

members and followed by discussions among participant attendees. We also observed role-play events, including a slave branding ritual, discussed below.

During observations of these events, we paid close attention to emerging themes in both textual and physical interactions among participants, the manifestation of activity within specific areas of the setting, the influence of sociocultural values on the spatial positioning of avatars, and the use of artifacts to constitute space and place. On completion of each educational session, we conducted semistructured interviews, using both public group chat and private instant messaging, to engage participants in reflections on the event's personal meaning and its relationship to Ithaca culture. Ithaca comprises many private areas as well, including personal apartments, sky boxes, and castle estates. We conducted in-depth interviews within the context of these settings to investigate the process through which members design, construct, and experience their personal dwellings and the influences contributing to these decisions. Throughout the course of this study, we used Second Life's free-roaming camera capabilities to take screenshot images of the settings within which we conducted our study.

In the following sections we examine (a) how participants cultivate a sense of space and place and (b) the implications of embodied bodily performance in experiencing space and place.

From Virtual Space to Social Place

Ithaca presents a space largely blanketed by a rough desert terrain. This space is partitioned into various areas, such as the marketplace, pictured in Figure 1, and populated by numerous buildings and constructions. The aesthetics of Gorean buildings are strongly influenced by the romanticized notions of Greco-Roman architecture described in Norman's novels. The arid desert surroundings and classically influenced buildings collectively evoke a visual space recognized by participants as central Ithaca. The majority of public events, educational courses, and informal gatherings occur within this space. As members move among the landscape and buildings, they acquire a sense of direction and develop a coordinate frame based on a relational network of familiar artifacts and locations (Tuan, 1976). Similar to real life, sound also helps guide members, evoking a spatial impression through variable dynamics (Tuan, 1976). Laughter, splashing water and musical tones projecting from instruments are among the many sounds common to Ithaca, which project louder or quieter tones depending on participants' spatial relation to them.

Developing increased familiarities with the landscape as well as objects, such as tents, populating its surface causes participants to attach personal meaning to these new landmarks, signifying a key movement toward transforming space into place. Equally important in this evolution is sustained concrete interaction among local community members, which results in a variety of experiential meanings.

Through our observation and interviews, four clusterings of felt experiences emerged among participants including *public*, *private*, *newbie*, and *veteran*. *Public* refers to the experience of being in a Gorean community, as either a dominant master or submissive slave, and interacting in a community-wide event held in an open, communal space. By contrast, members enacting the role of a dominant or submissive within personal quarters represent the *private* felt experience. The *newbie* experience is exemplified by a combination of nervous excitement and intimidation caused by being within a space characterized by the Gorean subculture. *Veteran* refers to the felt experience of long-term participants, who primarily focus on emotional connections

Figure 1. The Ithaca Marketplace Is Ripe for Social Interactions

between people, transforming the newbie's perception of space from a venue for kinky sex to a familiar place to engage with close friends. For the veteran participant, artifacts become less visible and significant, and experience is characterized by affective interaction between community members. This transition marks a key shift in the characterization of Ithaca as place, distinguished by a network of members and emotional connections, as opposed to a mere space typified by virtual constructions and artifacts.

As the community evolves through members' sustained concrete interactions, it becomes understood as a place, and its literal spatial features become increasingly less important. Facilitating the transition from space to place, participants experience Ithaca through a system of rules (in Aarseth's [2004] sense) that specify the use of space. The social organization emerging from the members' demarcation of space reflects key cultural values of the community (Barth, 1969). For instance, the tavern in Ithaca holds a specific meaning for local community members—a bar hangout. However, in other Gorean communities such as Trillon, the tavern has come to mean something entirely different, used not only as a social hangout but also the place where training takes place. Places, particularly the dichotomy between public and private, occasion a series of productive tensions pregnant with meaning. We examine public versus private spaces in the next sections to understand how space shapes avatar experience within this 3D-based virtual community.

PUBLIC SPACES AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Place serves to contextualize actions, forging specific meaning in relation to the surrounding sociocultural environment. In Gor, community roles and social class play a

Figure 2. Participants Are Physically Arranged According to Social Status

key part in determining members' conceptual understanding of space and place and the meaning of artifacts. Ithaca administrators are situated at the pinnacle of its social hierarchy, representing the most powerful and influential members in the community. During public events, administrators are typically separated from the rest of the members, seated in elaborately designed chairs facing the central stage. At the same event, free members and slaves are seated on the ground. The demarcation of socially organized space and the perspective it connotes for members of each class directly influences experience of space and place as well as which artifact is socially acceptable to sit on. As members ascend the social ranks of Ithaca, they are allowed to enter increasingly selective and secretive private domains, expanding their conceptions of space and crafting a deeper sense of place.

The Ithaca learning center represents a public place exemplifying this spatial reinforcement of Ithaca's social stratification. As displayed in Figure 2, the sole council member is seated in the elevated throne in the background, whereas in front of her sit submissive slaves on the ground, and finally free citizens sit on the velvet cushions in the foreground. Their organization is hierarchically arranged in 3D space, both relative to the 2D plane of the floor and also according to distance from the floor (ground, cushions, chair). The hierarchical spatial organization embodies and visually reinforces Ithaca's caste system, a phenomenon replicated in virtually all public spaces.

The aesthetics, social stratification, and rule system traditional to places within the city area of Ithaca manifest themselves, but in different ways, in the surrounding jungle outskirts. Contrasting the drab desert landscape in the Ithaca cityscape, Figure 3 displays a lush, bucolic environment. Discussions with Sandress,¹ an instructor and inhabitant of the jungle, revealed that she felt a close connection with the underlying themes and rituals involving nature within Norman's Gorean novels. She described the circular design aesthetics of artifacts found around the campsite as symbolic of the cyclical metaphor of nature:

Circles are important in Gor—in connection with nature. Circles are often found in nature, not rectangles or squares. Rectangles and squares are not natural, in the gorean mind [in the books].

Figure 3. The Jungle Differs From the Cityscape Both in Texture and Geometry

Social stratification is also significant in the jungle, but it is not spatialized in the same way that it is in the city. In the city, members traditionally sit in relation to each other according to status within the Ithaca social hierarchy; however, in this jungle setting, participants sit in a circle around the roaring campfire. The social classes of free and slave continue to exist within the jungle, but a different rule system governs the demarcation of space and symbolism, making the jungle differ more than just visually from the city.

Another way researchers can investigate how a community understands its places is to study the artifacts within the places. Artifacts play a significant role in shaping and reflecting members' understanding of place, and Ithaca is no exception. Participants form relationships to one another among artifacts, crafting a material ecology in which their relationships are enacted. In our interviews, a few members described deeply personal relationships with virtual artifacts:

The feathers [are my most important object]. They are symbolic of acceptance as Sampson's mate by a native woman we respect. Even though they aren't real, it's the symbolic offering that's the most important. Not the items themselves. (Tamari)

[My favorite object is] my collar because i am His, and only His, it is the symbol of O/our D/s [Dominant/submissive] relationship and all that means to U/us. (Maugwen)

[My] most precious object is the chair on the deck. It is where we sit and talk. It can be about stuff going on in Ithaca or what is happening to us in RL. It was been with us throughout our time together and sometimes we just sit there and don't speak at all. (Dianna)

In each of these responses, the artifact discussed by participants is held significant because of its projection of deeply personal emotional connections rather than its general aesthetic qualities.

Figure 4. Public Spaces in Ithaca Tend To Be Very Open

It is not surprising that the meaning and uses of artifacts in public spaces differed from those of private ones. Public places within Ithaca present furniture to accommodate large numbers of people and are generally constructed in large rooms or open spaces (as shown in Figure 4). Poseballs are also common to these places, which, when touched, allow members to assume particular poses appropriate for their avatar within the broader rule system of Ithaca.²

The material ecology composed of furniture, poseballs, and various other artifacts combined with expansive unobstructed space craft a distinctly public space for Ithaca members. Participants' sustained interactions within the material ecology provide a deeper understand of what it means to experience public space and the culturally appropriate actions to take within it.

PRIVATE PLACES AND INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

Private places play an important role in Ithaca community members' lives, providing a personal setting to develop relationships with oneself, through creative use of aesthetics and symbolism, as well as with other community members. Members' private places range from elaborate castles set on grandiose estates to skyboxes (the "skybox," seen in Figure 5, is a common Second Life structure, which is typically a private house that floats in the sky, high above the public land). In particular, the use of a skybox as personal space reflects members' appropriation of "conventional" conceptualizations of suitable space for place, symbolically highlighting the need to carve out a personal place distinctly separate from community space.

In contrast to public spaces, private places are characterized by much smaller room spaces and furniture; they are typically designed for use by one or two people or, in

Figure 5. From the Outside, the Skybox Can Be as Simple as a Floating Rectangle; Inside, it Is the Meaning-Laden Private Residence of One or More Participants

some cases, small gatherings. The symbolic ecology of artifacts within these places typically reflects a particular aesthetic theme chosen and designed by the inhabitants. As opposed to the generic “sit” poses found in public spaces, private spaces tend to feature more specialized poseballs (illustrated in Figure 6), affording members the opportunity to engage in intimate positions and interactions.

Though Ithaca is a large social community, its members spend a lot of time in and energy on their private places. Indeed, the majority of private homes we observed and conducted interviews within are considered by members to be their favorite place within Second Life.

[My home] allows me to escape from Ithaca and also my RL [real life]. This is where I can be me. . . . I have probably spent more time in my SL [Second Life] house then I have in my RL [real life] house this year. My SL house is where I escape to. (Dianna)

This response is representative of many participants’ thoughts, conveying a deep-rooted connection with their private homes, reflecting the calming nature and personal independence provided by these places. The collective aesthetics of the architectural construction of personal space as well as the ecology of artifacts within the home evoked distinct and often diverse themes, such as Gorean, Asian, and medieval. Each separate theme had a different motivation for its selection. One participant describes why her home carries on the Gorean visual style.

We wanted a Gorean feel to it so that visitors from Ithaca or even Gorean visitors from other cities could feel comfortable. . . . There are certain objects that are built based upon an interpretation of something from the books, the bazi tea service [Figure 7] of this table for example and the pillows that you are sitting on [Figure 7]. But, ultimately they are an interpretation. (Dianna)

Figure 6. Sandress and Her Female Submissive Interlock in a Poseball Cuddle

This passage reflects the careful interpretive lens applied to design and placement of artifacts, which collectively construct a symbolic ecology to evoke authentically Gorean experience for inhabitants of both Ithaca and Gor in general.

Another participant explains why she chose an Asian look for her private residence.

We admired the simplicity [of Asian aesthetics]. Also my daughter is half Chinese and she has a home somewhat similar and it's very comfortable. Sampson spent a lot of time in Southeast Asia as well. (Tamari)

The strong use of Asian aesthetic (displayed in Figure 8) signifies a drastic departure from the traditional Gorean motif. Tamari's statement reveals the group's central motivation was to construct a place intimately comfortable based on real-life values and familial connections.

Another participant describes building in ways that clearly, if surprisingly, reflect the community in which he builds:

The emotional atmosphere [of Ithaca] is much, much richer than other Gorean sims because the P/people are really *present*, the souls are there behind the avatars. . . . I see this reflected in the beauty of design of O/our building [home castle estate shared with slaves] . . . in every detail of the rich upholstery . . . the place of each plant/flower/tree. In an odd way, SL is a perfect medium to make the surroundings "obedient" to One's will. . . . That is what builders do. (Bellus)

In this passage, Bellus posits the complex design and construction of his castle estate (featured in Figure 9) as a symbolic embodiment characteristic of the intricate emotional connections among Ithaca community members. Bellus extends the culturally infused master-slave dichotomy, involving obedience, to interpret the function of the

Figure 7. These Artifacts Help Compose Symbolic Ecology to Evoke a Personally Crafted Gorean Aesthetic Within This Participant's Home

3D modeling application in Second Life, asserting the same dominance as a user to the in-world tool set that he would as a master to a submissive.

As conveyed in these examples, the deliberate choices behind the design of participants' homes and their relationship to it reflect manifestations of members' personal interpretations of the Gorean doctrines as well as real-life values, experiences, and

Figure 8. These Artifacts Help Compose Symbolic Ecology to Evoke a Personally Crafted Gorean Aesthetic Within This Participant's Home

needs. For some, the personal meanings derived from Ithaca center on interacting within a community where it is safe for them to explore sides of their personality that they are unable to explore in real life, whereas for others emphasis is placed on replicating their personal vision of how the Gorean livelihood should be simulated. For

Figure 9. The Intricately Designed Castle and Estate Reflect the Emotional Complexity of Life in Ithaca

example, the vast majority of dominant class members, either masters or mistresses, offer free access to their submissive slaves, allowing them to come and go as they please within their personal space. In contrast, one dominant mistress remarked that while on her personal estate, slaves had restricted access and were only allowed in certain areas. This illustrates how varying interpretations of the Gorean lifestyle lead to different conceptualizations of public and private space.

The Slave's Body as a Place

As in real life, the corporeal and material aspect of the virtual body occupies space, and the positions and coordinates of the avatar's body are extrapolated onto the environments she or he occupies. Second Life animates the avatar's body automatically when she or he moves, flies, or even types, and the player has a wide range of animations (e.g., free or otherwise) in-world to make the virtual body further come to life. As the Gorean narrative unfolds in the virtual simulated space of Second Life, the Gorean setting is projected from the avatar who enacts the drama. The Gorean performance of the body is constantly constructed and reconstructed by the avatar's movement through places and in time.

In Ithaca, the everyday routine of Ithaca citizens—bathing, serving, hunting, dancing, archiving, healing—is not only prescribed by Gorean mores but also further constrained and complicated by digitality, specifically Second Life as a technical environment. For example, an avatar playing the slave who is about to step into the water in a Gorean bath house in service to her master is constrained in how she plays the part; that is, by using a sequence of appropriate poseballs, she prostrates her body in prescribed ways to show servitude and submission during role-play. The avatar's body is further dependent on network connection, which can cause the avatar to exhibit abnormal behaviors as a result of lag, rendering bugs, and so on. Accordingly, the body of an Ithaca citizen is the locus of a dialectic: to be one's own person and yet also to be subject to another, as a slave's body is owned by her master. In addition, the virtual body is also a computational object, a physical manifestation of an information system encompassing data, pixels, and electrons (Dix, 2006; Reeves, 2006) and is therefore subjected to quirks of the system. In the ensuing section, we continue our exploration of avatar's spatial experience and interaction in Ithaca by highlighting the notion of performance, particularly bodily performance.

Feminist geographers often consider the body as a place, a "location or site . . . of the individual" (McDowell, 1999). Judith Butler (1990) developed the influential concept of "performativity," regarding gender identities as a performance in the "stylized repetition of acts." To Butler, being a woman is not a natural fact but "a cultural performance [in which] 'naturalness' [is] constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex" (cited in McDowell, 1999, p. 54). In Ithaca, gendered performance is conditioned by the fantasy narrative of Gor, revealing high correlation between the Gorean social conventions (i.e., the rule system of the role-play community) and the individual's understanding, interpretation, and adherence of such conventions. We explore these phenomena by examining bodily performance in Ithaca in light of the following questions:

- How does a culturally constituted virtual body of an Ithaca citizen enact community rules, belief, rituals, and power dynamics through performance in the space?
- How are places in Ithaca configured to enable such performance?
- How are actions and interaction communicated through avatars' bodily performance?

To examine the significance of the notion that the body is a place, we explore relationships between bodily representations and behavior and the ritualized making of a slave.

REPRESENTING THE FEMALE SUBMISSIVE

In a virtual community such as Ithaca, the Gorean philosophy drives the perception, conception, and the use of the virtual body. This stratified society places the control of

a slave's body in the hand of her master or mistress and/or the city to which she belongs.³ The body is punished should the slave commit any infractions. The slave's body can be a trophy lending prestige to a master or mistress. The slave's body is marked to indicate various aspects of her status, including ownership, sexual history, and standing in the community.

In a society where the surrender of the body of a slave is expected and prized, the choice of how a slave carries and presents her body is no longer private and voluntary; the slave cannot simply use the body as a vehicle for individual self-expression, as many avatars are used in other virtual communities. Instead, she or he is subjected to enormous pressure to adhere to specific cultural expectations. Although bodies in many obvious ways belong to individual, they are nonetheless defined and made meaningful by the community (i.e., Ithaca) and the culture at large (i.e., Gor). The difference in bodily performance for Ithaca slaves of varying categories is further illustrated by the difference in how daily routines are performed through the toil of the body in the space. When serving their masters or mistresses in a bathhouse, for example, avatars who are white silked are prohibited to show their bodies, whereas the red silks are expected to be sensual in their service:

Aegle: touching his body excites her like never before, Aegle finds it so erotic touching her Masters strong muscular body, his manhood more prevalent and evident then earlier excites her beyond belief. (Excerpts from a red silk bath in Ithaca)⁴

Crescentia: She strokes each leg from hip to ankle, ending with a spiral stroke that pulls the tension of his day out of his body and into the bath water. . . . The Master thinks, "Her hair has grown out, red curly and long, the way I like it. Her skin has taken on an attractive glow. She moves with some grace, not in that old awkward way. (Excerpts from a white silk bath in Ithaca)

The passages reveal different ways that the body is represented, and in particular, how the body is socially bound and rule bound. The red silk version of the bath includes explicit sexual interaction, whereas the white silk version is erotically charged, to be sure, but lacking explicit sex. The reader of the red silk's description experiences the slave's sexual pleasure directly, whereas the reader of the white silk's description experiences her sexuality indirectly, through the approving eyes of her master. The former is tactile; the latter is more abstract, filled with euphemism. Because one's ability to monitor and control bodily performance mediates and facilitates social interactions (Guffman, 1969), the fact that slaves of different categories are subject to the usage of their bodies based on socially prescribed rules suggests a high degree of social influence over the individual's management of her or his body.

RITUALLY INSCRIBING THE BODY: THE MAKING OF AN ITHACA SLAVE

Elizabeth Grosz (1994), following Foucault, regarded the body as a map for social inscription; specifically, Grosz argued that

the body, or bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself. (cited in McDowell, 1999, p. 53)

Bodies are inscribed and become meaningful in the ways that spaces become places; the short-term impact of the visual gives way over time to social interpretation.

In Ithaca, a citizen's body bears the mark of the Gorean culture and Ithaca's particular practice of its culture. This is especially evident in ritualistic events such as slave branding, where a slave who completes her training is inducted into the House of Ithaca and branded to signify the successful rite of passage. Consider the following passage:

- Cicero: kassia? What is the reason for you to be branded?
 Kassia: so that A/all who look upon the body of this slave may see the mark of the House that owns her, Master. . . .
 Cicero: girl, stand
 Kassia: yes Master
 Cicero: Well, no unnecessary jewelry
 Cicero: But the silks, will not do
 Cicero: <<rips the silks from off the girl>>. . . .
 Cicero: Now girl, turn and face this group of Free and kajirae of this great House. (Excerpts from a branding ceremony in Ithaca)

The above passages are excerpts from a typical branding ceremony in Ithaca. Held in the forge located in the open desert scene of Ithaca landscape, the ceremony is both personal and communal, and it marks the occasion of an accomplished slave's incorporation into the community proper, witnessed by both the free and the slaves alike. Participants are notified through Second Life's "group announcement" mechanism. Citizens and guests of Ithaca teleport to a welcome area, walk to the ceremonial site, and form a semicircle in hierarchical order around the stage where the ceremonial props (e.g., branding frame, hot iron, water bucket, medicine supplies, and examination cot) are housed and the main actors stand (e.g., the slave who is about to be branded, the Heads of the House [who preside over the ceremony], the assistants, and the medical professionals in the community).

Ithaca prides itself on not fast-tracking its slaves to being owned but rather putting them through a long process of training and enculturation. The administrators who ensure that this process is completed successfully are performing the roles of the "guardians of the threshold" (van Gennep, 1960), using this rite of passage to safeguard the boundary between the two worlds: Ithaca and beyond. Prior to the branding ritual, the slave is liminal (i.e., caught between two worlds), waiting to be united to the new world. The slave is fully aware that she is giving ownership of her body to the House, that it will no longer be her own. She signifies this change in the switch to the third person to refer to herself: "this slave," "this girl," and so on.

The sanctity of the ritual is such that it requires the full understanding and acceptance of those who wish to gain access. The symbolic act of stripping the silk down from the slave's body connotes community's readiness to accept the new member, a preparation for the incorporation and union. The slave thus leaves behind the old body and identity (i.e., the torn silk) and turns around to face the new community with a clean slate.

The branding ceremony continues,

- Cicero: To A/all present here this day, look upon this girl. . . .
 Cicero: This girl is uncovered, nothing is withheld from sight. Today, she gives herself freely and completely . . . all that is her . . . to A/all of U/us, to A/all of Gor. This is the ultimate step . . . the permanent branding and marking that will forever declare. . . .
 Cicero: The brand can not be removed, it is a permanent alteration. . . . As such the balance of this girl's days, she will were this reminder of this day.
 Cicero: The girl submits to this House and brings honor on A/all of U/us in so doing.

Figure 10. The Brand Placed on Slaves' Bodies Is Symbolic of Gorean Philosophy

Cicero: When a girl gives herself as a slave, she gives all of herself to her Master.
 Cicero: Nothing is head back . . . nothing withheld.
 Cicero: kassia, do you understand this
 Kassia: yes Master, this girl does
 Cicero: The girl becomes one with Him and His wishes.
 Cicero: They become your wishes and your desires.

The passage above bears testimony to the notion “body as place for social inscription,” and in this case it is to be taken both literally and metaphorically. The Ithaca rules and Gorean philosophy are literally inscribed into the flesh of the slave (Figure 10) and become one with the slave permanently. The brand produces a new body and identity out of the slave, bound by Gorean regulation and Ithaca rules. The newly branded Ithaca slave is to carry herself appropriately so as not to bring dishonor to her new family. Indeed, the branded slave’s body and identity become socially constructed, “manifested and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, 1990, p. 136).

The community fashions the slave’s new body by searing a graphical brand onto her inner thigh, thus marking her as a servant of the house through a thoroughly engrossing public event:

- Cicero: I kneel here to respect you . . . for your love and your submission to this House and to Gor.
- Cicero: <<locates the spot that is to be branded on the inner left thigh>>. . .
- Cicero: <<Leans forward and softly kisses the spot to be branded.>>
- Cicero: <<moves the brand into place over the designated spot>>
 Phaedra smiles through tears.
 Laressa looks with tears in her eyes, first at her sister and then her Master
 Marlena feels a tear on her cheek. . . .
 Valeria's eyes wet
 Phaedra holds sis tight, "almost over sis"
- Cicero: <<reaches into My pocket, and pulls out a leather crop, and offers it to the girl to bite down on>>
- Cicero: Ready kassia?
 Jocasta wipes her tears with the edge of her silk
 Marlena tells her sis it will be finished soon but your happiness will be forever
- Kassia: yes Master . . . *smiles nervously*
- Cicero: <<presses the white hot brazier into the girl's soft thigh>>
 Marlena is proud of her sis
 Kassia cries out in pain and agony, tears streaming down her face
- Cicero: <<holds the iron in place, long enough to secure the appropriate result>>
 Laressa grimaces tearfully
 Rowena gasps
- Cicero: <<pulls the brand away, the sizzle stops, but the heat remains>>
- Cicero: <<observes closely to make sure that the branding is taking effect, and the scar is forming properly>>. . .
- Cicero: The deed is done. . . . The girl is now branded a slave of Gor. . . . Her journey here is completed. . . . She is kajiria. (Excerpts from a branding ceremony in Ithaca)

The slave is now successfully incorporated into Ithaca; the rite of passage is completed with the support and welcoming of the community. The ritual brings to the fore the notion of body as the canvas for social practice, which is both decorative and invasive. The body of the slave is strapped into the frame, and once branded the slave has no ability to control and monitor her bodily performance—all interaction with the other henceforth is determined by Ithaca. In other words, it is the community that manages the body of a branded slave, facilitates and mediates all social interaction. This invasion of the individual body is necessary to transfer ownership of the body from the individual to the institution. When the individual cedes such ownership, the individual and communal bodies become one, made meaningful and significant by the institution.

Conclusion

Second Life produces a different experience for the person role-playing a physician in Ithaca than the "user"—who may in fact be the same person—purchasing a book at Amazon.com. The 3D computer-mediated environment transforms the opaque 2D interface of the screen into a transparent window onto a virtual world (Manovich, 2001), such that rather than acting directly on the screen, the user is embodied and immersed within the screen. As demonstrated in our study of Ithaca, we see a trend in 3D immersive virtual worlds where the meaning of a place is interpretively constructed not by the individual but collectively, or intersubjectively, by the community, where the

opposition between the public and the private space is apparent and also contested, and where the body of the individual becomes a place for social inscription.

By studying these phenomena, we are able to see patterns emerge, which we can summarize as a series of coordinated oppositions between the objective experience of a 3D community and the intersubjective experience of that community:

Objective	Intersubjective
Space	Place
Collection of artifacts and buildings visible to anyone	Material ecology perceptible only to insiders
The avatar as textured 3D model	The avatar as culturally inscribed place
Available through senses (sight, sound)	Available only through social interpretation
Exotic, arbitrary	Familiar, rule governed
External	Intimate, personal
Cognitive	Emotional

To move from the objective to the intersubjective versions of the community space, the individual participant needs to be incorporated into the community of practice for that space. The long-term success of this community of practice depends on its ability to retain a stable, intersubjective understanding of its places and the embodied actors within it. Although this stability need not preclude disagreement or even fragmentation, these destabilizing forces need to be controlled, lest the community collapse. One way to ensure such stability is to place boundaries around the community and post gatekeepers at the entrances to ensure that no one enters the community until she or he—and the community—is ready for her or his incorporation. The online community of Ithaca relies on a carefully scripted ritual of entry that centers on education, and it organizes its spaces to support both initial education (through its educational facilities) and also to reinforce these values throughout its public facilities. Its private spaces are more flexible, and yet we found that many participants voluntarily extended many of these values into their virtual homes.

Beyond Second Life's Goreans, this study has implications for the analysis of technology mediated experiences. Specifically, we found two major characteristics of 3D-based virtual communities that McCarthy and Wright's (2004) spatiotemporal thread did not adequately address. First, the elements of 3D-based virtual communities are intersubjectively interpreted as places or material ecologies, which go far beyond individual perception or cognition. Second, participants experience them not by controlling them through dialog boxes and on-screen buttons but by being immersed in them as embodied avatars, avatars inscribed with ever-changing and highly complex meanings. Both the places and the avatar bodies can be, and often are, the locus of social conflict, and virtual communities need both technical and social mechanisms to deal with it.

More generally, because 3D social environments are experienced intersubjectively, the tools used to design and administer these environments need to focus not just on the literal building of spaces (i.e., 3D modeling tools) but also on the building of emotional, personal, and meaningful spaces—environments that facilitate the active and productive social construction of material ecologies where spaces, artifacts, and the meaning making are mutually constituted.

Notes

1. All the names of the avatars cited in the article have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.
2. Poseballs are common Second Life objects that appear in-world as small spheres; avatars can click on them to have prescribed poses, such as sitting in a chair, or animations, such as dancing, imposed on their avatars.
3. Throughout this section, we refer to slaves with the feminine *she* or *her*, reflecting that the majority of slaves are female in Ithaca. However, it is important to recognize both that female avatars can be free and that male avatars can be slaves.
4. The slaving categories of "white silk" and "red silk" are used to differentiate between slaves who are still virgins and those whose bodies have been "opened by men," respectively (Central Fire, n.d.).

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