



VISUAL WORLDS



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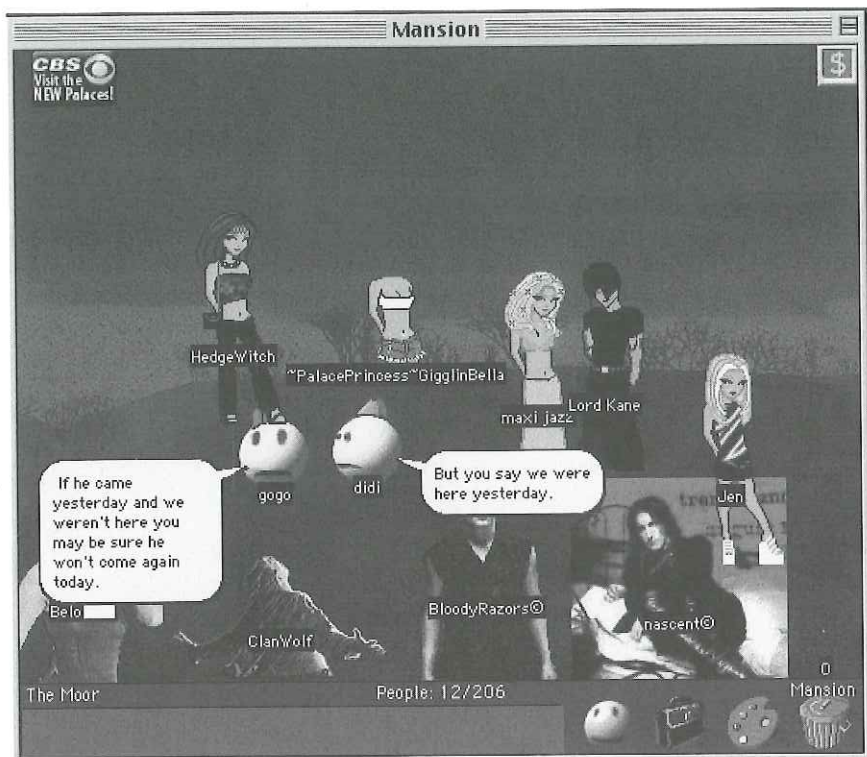


Figure 7.1 Desktop Theater, waitingforgodot.com, live production of *Waiting for Godot* in Palace chatroom, September 1997. Credit: Screen capture from the Jenik/Brenneis Desktop Theater archive.

7 Electronic *habitus*

Agit-prop in an imaginary world

Jennifer Gonzalez

It is because the imaginary offers the mind no resistance that the mind, conscious of no restraint, gives itself up to boundless ambitions and believes it possible to construct, or rather reconstruct, the world by virtue of its own strength and at the whim of its desires.¹

Given the sordid and often tragic history of power that inflects the most ambitious forms of "world" building (colonialism, fascism), it is informative and perhaps imperative to examine claims concerning both the production and the discovery of "new" worlds whenever they arise. Calls for "new world orders" rely heavily upon the idea that worlds exist to be ordered. It is therefore not a trivial pursuit to study the cultural contexts within which fantasies of world ordering take place. Here, I am using the term "world" in its broadest sense, implying both the philosophical or cosmological models produced in the interest of comprehensive knowledge or comprehensive theology, as well as the colloquial connotations of the word, suggesting a local or historical sphere of activity and influence.

The relatively recent proliferation of artificial or virtual "worlds" on the Internet testifies to the frequent conflation or interdependence of these definitions: invented cosmologies take on the characteristics of social clubs; vast imaginary territories reproduce ideologies of containment; and behaviors and bodily attributes can lead to acceptance or banishment. Each "new" world necessitates a discourse of visibility that circumscribes the boundaries of that world, its population, and its epistemological structure. Both local and global, these online "virtual" meeting spaces perhaps epitomize the notion of a "visual world." They are social artifacts that render a world through visual signs. Avatars stand in for human subjects, and a creative compendium of digitally rendered graphical environments serves as the stage for a relatively new and undeniably "public" life mediated by the image.

Most artificial worlds also produce an internally sophisticated form of imagined habitation. By "imagined habitation" I mean the construction of a space that cannot be physically inhabited, but which nevertheless interpellates or addresses a subject as an inhabitant. In particular, I am interested

in the optical politics of this kind of interpellation, and how it creates what might be called an *imaginary habitus* for participants. How are human subjects, as participants, invited to live in these worlds? How are freedom of expression, property rights, and economic class articulated? How does one engage politically and pragmatically within the constraints produced by these new fantasy spaces? What social, ethical, and epistemological role do vision and visibility play? Each of these questions deserves a thorough analysis, but in this preliminary examination, I respond only with preliminary answers.

The social phenomenon of artificial worlds continues to develop in dramatic ways with every passing year, and the information gathered for this essay is no doubt already out of date. Experienced participants, and the artificial world-builders and programmers themselves know the origin stories and transformations of these worlds in greater detail than I do. And sociologists are certainly better equipped to assess the long- and short-term cultural impact of these artificial worlds. As a scholar of visual culture, I am rather more intrigued by the philosophical and theoretical implications of an artificial world structured around a set of visual protocols. In short, how is a politics of representation made literal in such spaces? And, equally pressing, how is it possible to construct a critical voice within this new and growing public domain of imagined habitation?

Visible worlds

Rendering the world in visual form is not a novel enterprise. Even discounting cartography, there have been numerous attempts to encapsulate the heavens and the earth in images. In an encyclopedic gesture in 1777, Johann Amos Comenius produced a compendium of aphorisms and small woodcuts titled *The Visible World*. Intended as a Latin primer for boys, the text claimed to offer a nearly comprehensive representation of the “chief things” to be found in the universe. Its full title – *The Visible World, or, The Chief Things Therein: Drawn in Pictures: Originally written in Latin and High Dutch: Now Rendered Easy to the Capacities of Children* – reveals its effort to encode the universe for the novice in a lightweight portable device: the book. Comenius’ visible world is a moral text, and, like all moral texts, it offers an outline of a theory of practice (how to act), a presentation of history (what has been), a taxonomy for proper social relations (who one is), and an ordering of spatial discourse (where things are). The book begins with the world in its totality, represented in a single cosmological image.

The heaven hath fire and stars, the clouds hang in the air, birds fly under the clouds, fishes swim in the water, the earth hath hills, woods, beasts, fields and men, thus the greatest bodies of the world, the four elements, have their own inhabitants.

Heaven, air, and water, are subsequently represented individually to better illustrate their individual components, then animals of all kinds, ordered by their terrestrial or celestial habitats. Agriculture and other methods of human sustenance are described, along with tools and architectural forms. Workers, from the blacksmith to the cobbler, are depicted in their workshops. Master and servant are described as a related pair, their relative class positions confirmed by the moral obligation of one to the other. Abstract human traits, such as "diligence" and "temperance," are represented allegorically and whole religious doctrines (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) are visually summarized and compressed onto a single iconic page. All the knowable and thinkable world, it seems, is represented here, with the important exception of political dissent.

In its desire to be comprehensive, *The Visible World* succeeds in drawing attention to the ideological mapping that structures the book, at least as much as to the things it supposedly represents. A rather crudely formed pedagogical text, it nevertheless reveals a boundless ambition: to reconstruct the world, its components, categories, and concepts visually and linguistically. The text engages "the visible" as that which not only appears to the eye, but also to the mind and to the moral imagination. The visible world for Comenius is the conceivable world. The book suggests a system of values such that inclusion within its pages is somehow equivalent to having a place in the world, to having an existential legitimization. *The Visible World* serves here not as a point of origin, but rather as a frame of reference for the general social and historical impulse to visualize worlds – an impulse that takes inhabitants and habitation as central organizing principles. It is revealing to compare Comenius' vision to the online virtual environment *Alpha World*. Part of a larger universe of graphically rendered virtual worlds supported by Activeworlds.com, *Alpha World* is an "active world" built and populated by citizen inhabitants. Originally designed by Ron Britvich in 1995, *Alpha World* was unique among virtual worlds for its hands-on approach. Users were given the tools and techniques necessary to design their own 3-D graphical "objects."²

These objects, such as walls, doors, fences, waterfalls, windows, plants, textures, colors, and so on, can be placed on any unoccupied space of the 429,025 km² world (roughly equivalent to the size of California). Since its inception *Alpha World's* population has grown exponentially. Now thousands of participants have constructed a remarkable landscape of buildings and streets, rivers and streams, grass and trees, mountains and deserts, homes and castles. Creative variety and innovative vision abounds, and yet the majority of *Alpha World* space looks remarkably like a suburban or rural landscape surrounded by a vast field of green grass, blue sky, and distant mountains.

Populated by avatars – the graphical representation of participants – the space of *Alpha World* is not unlike an interactive animation. Avatars in *Alpha World* look like cartoon drawings of people of various shapes, sizes, genders,

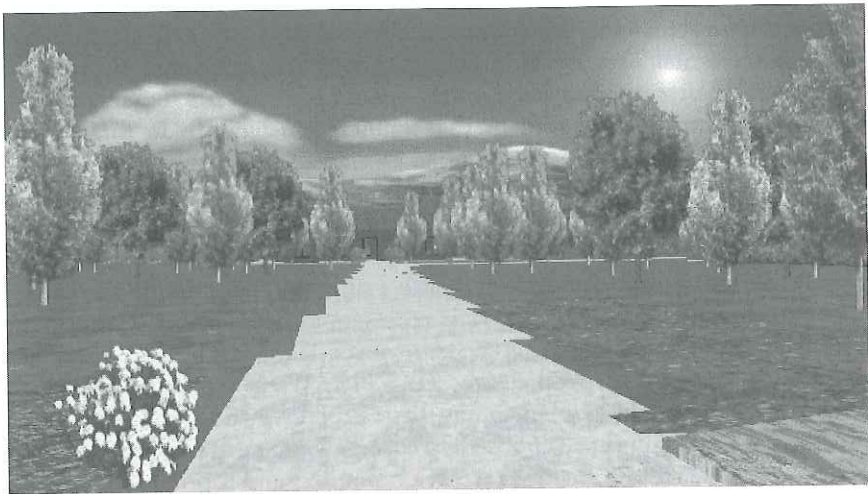


Figure 7.2 *Alpha World*, view of “Sherwood.” © Activeworlds.com. Reprinted with permission.

and ethnicities. If one pays an annual fee, one is allowed to select an avatar from a generic group of about 15 or 20 possible body types. Otherwise, temporary visitors are assigned a default body shared by the other visitors (the current default avatar wears a body suit emblazoned with a Pentium commercial logo). “Inhabitants” spend much of their time building graphical objects (usually commercial sites, meeting spaces, homes, and gardens), traveling from place to place (avatars can fly more quickly than walking), or trying to strike up conversations (visible as text balloons) with other inhabitants while maintaining a discreet anonymity. All participants can choose between two points of view: either first-person (from the position of the avatar’s body) or omniscient (a view from above and behind the avatar’s body as it moves through space). This doubling of vision creates a cinematic effect, where one is both identified with the avatar (the self as protagonist), and identified as the director who manipulates or animates the avatar from “off screen” with commands on the computer. The avatar becomes a synthetic actor, a doll, or a mask, as others have observed. With only a limited range of gestures, expressions, and emotions such as smiling, waving, frowning, laughing, dancing, hitting, and jumping, the avatar’s visible behaviors are carefully scripted and constrained. This means that, unless one has the privilege (as a programmer) of inventing new actions or avatars, one’s bodily self-expression is reduced to a fairly narrow repertoire.

Initially, there seems to be little or only superficial resemblance between *Alpha World* and Comenius’ *Visible World* of 1777. The virtual world is not designed to merely represent things that *already* exist in the world, but rather to offer visitors the opportunity to create an imaginary world to

inhabit. *Alpha World* is participatory rather than pedagogical, and it has multiple authors, which ensures the space is visually dynamic rather than static. At the same time, both projects contribute to parallel discourses of world mapping and models of habitation. Both attempt to visualize a world (or worlds) through a kind of microcosmic or encyclopedic representation of the "chief things" to be found there – such as buildings and roads, trees and people, market places, and landscapes. Both construct artificial boundaries that are represented as absolute. Although its territories are still being "developed," *Alpha World* has a finite amount of space, visible on topographical "satellite" maps. As Ron Britvich explains, the unit of measurement in *Alpha World* is a unit of *visibility*, not a unit of space (100 by 100 meters is the maximum frame of vision). Like Comenius' *Visible World*, in *Alpha World* the conceivable world *is* the visible world. Visual presence is equivalent to existential legitimization. In both worlds, there are rules and modes of habitation to which one must conform. In *Alpha World*, as in many virtual worlds, there is an initial feeling of lawlessness for new participants, in part because there are fewer recognizable regulatory signs of power. But like an ideological state apparatus, the rules in artificial worlds are written elsewhere and passed on by behaviors and protocols of interaction. If one wants to look for the rules, of course, as with any discourse of law, they can be found. Inhabitants of *Alpha World* are warned: "(1) Do not under any circumstances divulge personal information about yourself such as your real name, email address, address, or telephone number to other members . . . (3) Do not use blatant expressions of bigotry, racism, hatred or profanity. . . . (8) Do not disrupt the normal flow of dialogue . . . (13) Do not provide instructions for illegal activities. . .", and so on.³ *Alpha World*, and other artificial worlds, are thus also moral texts insofar as they offer an outline of a theory of practice (how to act), a presentation of history (what has been), a taxonomy for proper social relations (who one is), and an ordering of spatial discourse (where things are).

It is clear from published interviews with the designers that *Alpha World* was conceived as an experimental domain where any kind of body, any kind of politics, and any kind of social structure might be possible. Ron Britvich commented:

One of the keys, also, of Alpha [World] is that I want to enable a diverse form of government. So you can have a Wild West area where anything goes, where everyone can tear down each other's property. And on the flip side, you'd have a very rigid, controlled space. You'd also have the entire range of responsibility and regulation in between the extremes. People could then choose which community they're most comfortable with.⁴

Political pluralism appears to be the conceptual ground for Britvich's vision of multiple worlds, where each world has its own rules and regulations,

aesthetic style, and ethics of behavior. This pluralist model of citizen participation operating within social monads, reveals its own inherent dilemmas.

The so-called "Wild West" – where cattle commerce and railroad expansion clashed with indigenous communities and territories – becomes the domain where "everyone can tear down each other's property." Is this not a scenario that is all too familiar, too historically loaded? Whose property was sacred? Who continues to tear it down? On the Activeworlds.com website they also use the trope of the Wild West to announce a new feature for building home pages. The advertising rhetoric is similar to that of Home Depot, a chain of commercial home improvement stores that have become both ubiquitous and predatory in the USA. Emphasis is placed on the ease of constructing a home or a world, and on the pleasure of sharing your new home with your family and friends. World building becomes no longer a question of divine right or encyclopedic effort, but a question of 30-day free trials.

Think building a 3D world from scratch is too hard? then try our New! 3D Homepages and get your own world in minutes. Once you step inside your 3D Homepage, you can move about, explore, meet relatives, hold family gatherings, and chat with any visitors to your site. [...] It's fun, it's cool and most of all it is accessible to anyone who wants one. [...] Create your own personal 3D Homepage today for a 30 day free trial! Just click the picture above and be on your way to experiencing one of the most innovative Internet concepts of the 21st century. You will be amazed at how quickly and easily your 3D Homepage develops. Within just a few minutes, you will not only have created your own personal 3D Homepage but you will find yourself standing right in the middle of it, showing it off to all your friends. 3D Homepages, it is not just a site, it's an experience, try it today!⁵

What are the consequences of building a world in "just minutes?" What kind of experience is promised? The only way to find out is to have a PC computer with a fast hard drive and the funds to buy a membership. Despite the rhetoric, a new world and its imaginary habitation are not accessible (or inviting) to everyone. The picture to "click on" in order to "be on your way" has the rounded-square shape of a television screen of a past era. The view we see is a "Western" town in the USA circa 1880, the typical small-town scene from a Hollywood Western film. One bright light glitters from a window across the dusty main street, otherwise devoid of human life. It is twilight, and the cactus in the distance lends an air of authenticity. The frontier is still the American frontier, the idea of home still tied to the history of homesteading. As a woman or as a Native American, would I be "comfortable" here? The technology may be new, but the fantasy offered by the marketing department is over 100 years old.

Britvitch's pluralist logic for artificial worlds structured around the notion of spheres of "comfort" ignores the inevitable challenge of dissenting views and moral "discomfort" that migrate, like people, between worlds. As Margaret Morse has argued, "The nature of the virtual environment as a symbolic field or externalized imagination suggests why action within it is not free nor lacking in emotional and social consequences." If the ideological structure of artificial worlds comes to parallel that of communities in the "real" world, the emotional and social consequences of maintaining various levels of personal "comfort" are not insignificant. Inclusion and exclusion become more than simple acts of role-playing and fantasy that remain limited to a virtual domain. Instead, artificial worlds provide a particularly rich site for the visual mapping and elaboration of cultural models (and cultural stereotypes) that exist offline. They structure behavioral systems and regulate social interaction through visual cues strategically selected for this purpose. Hence avatar bodies are sometimes racially type-cast, or they can be identified with iconographic symbols that reveal the avatar's social status within the artificial world. The worlds themselves have clear political agendas, social hierarchies, and architectural limits. In this context, a "unit of visibility" is a form of personal property that is created (or bought) by the user in order to occupy an essentially public space. Every pixel of the graphical interface – considered the internal anatomy or atomic structure of the artificial world – becomes a potential site for occupation and contestation.⁶

Spheres of representation

The question of visual representation as the basis for social and perhaps even political representation is thus of immediate concern within artificial worlds. This fact runs counter to Roy Ascott's utopian distinction between appearance and apparition in his 1993 article "From appearance to apparition: communications and consciousness in the cybersphere." Writing about a then-new "telematic" art he asked:

Can an art that is concerned, as Western art has always been, with appearance, with the look of things, with surface reality, have any relevance in our systems-based culture, in which apparition, emergence, and transformation are seminal? Can representation coexist with constructivism?⁷

He goes on to suggest that representation

is no longer relevant to a culture that is progressively concerned with the complexity of relationships and subtlety of systems, with the invisible and immaterial, the evolutive and the evanescent, in short, with apparition. Questions of representation no longer interest us.

He concludes that "Art is no longer a window onto the world but a doorway through which the observer is invited to enter into a world of interaction and transformation."⁸ *Alpha World*, as a popular, commercial venture, is not what Ascott had in mind when writing about telematic art. Ascott's essay is a call for artistic transformation, not commercial applicability. Nevertheless, his argument allows us to consider whether, a decade later, the networked system of the Internet does not, in fact, rely to a large degree on questions of representation. Part of Ascott's vision about apparition and interaction is certainly imbedded in the early history of artificial worlds. In *Alpha World*, representation of the world becomes a constructivist building project; appearance in the world becomes a form of interactive apparition. This is not only the case with roles played by the participants' avatars, but even the landscape itself; indeed, every object that takes on a visual appearance is also an animated "apparition" with existential significance. As Maggie Morse has observed in her essay "Nature morte":

The virtual landscape is not just the ground or background or the landscape at which we look [. . .] It tracks our every move and constitutes itself as a display in response to the indices of intention and the vectors of body position, gaze, and motion – that is, virtual space itself is interactive.⁹

Thus, counter to Ascott's earlier claims, representation in cyberspace is not merely a matter of appearance, but is also a matter of ontology and a question of systemic relations between elements in a complex mediated social structure.

It may be that a Foucauldian model of pluralism can offer a framework for understanding power that is distributed into a complex and ever-changing network of relations between social actors. Power for Foucault rests as much in individual acts of submission or resistance to laws, rules, and regulations on a day-to-day basis, as it rests in the structural framework or social hierarchy of classes and political systems. Let us assume, then, that there is an obvious intersection between visual representation and political or social representation in online virtual worlds. To have a visible body is to have a social position, a social role, a right to speak, and the very basic possibility of physical agency. To be invisible in an artificial world is either to wield no power whatsoever, and to be relegated to oblivion, or to wield absolute power in the form of the master who controls the scene from afar, in short, the programmers and others who are responsible for the maintenance and the existence of these worlds. Visibility is therefore already a question of position in a hierarchy of values and levels of control.

When we think of the way the word "representation" works in phrases such as "representative democracy" or "theories of representation" we can easily locate the first phrase within the discourse of politics, and the second,

more likely in the discourse of film theory, art history, and media studies. With artificial worlds there is a merging of the two domains of representation, where theories of representation – regarding the structuring of images, their interplay, and their conceptual ground – run in parallel with the notion of a political or at least social representation where actions and power relations are tied to visible text and motion, but in an artificial space.

In addition to two kinds of representation, there are at least two kinds of ontology. The most obvious and yet that which is essentially invisible is the programming language and the code that allows the world to exist. The second kind of ontology is that of the image, the visual *tropology* of the artificial world, which is also occasionally dictated by the exigencies of the machine but is more importantly shaped by a common lexicon of popular image types.

For it seems clear that, in the same way we think about literary tropes, there are standard visual tropes that recur in many artificial and virtual worlds. Why would Activeworlds.com use the retrograde television screen as its default design, and the Hollywood Western as one of its key images? What kind of dominance, not only cultural but also visual, do these two frames of reference hold? Why is the primary landscape in *Alpha World* an *empty* green prairie with blue sky, snowcapped mountains and sunshine? Even if one can find all kinds of landscapes in *Alpha World* today, and even take a trip to Mars (which is also presented as a landscape of discovery and exploration), it seems worth interrogating the visual discourse that shapes these initial forays into world-building. Of course, not all artificial worlds share the same aesthetic, but many borrow from a familiar repertoire of images found in popular culture, in fairy tales, in cinema, in games, and in advertising. These are the well-established tropes or visual “spheres” of representation that are leveraged to create a sense of “home” and ultimately a “zone” of visual “comfort” for participants: an image-based or imaginary *habitus*.

Agit-prop in an electronic *habitus*

For sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the *habitus* is a name given to an acquired system of generative schemes, as well as a set of limits to operations of invention. The *habitus* defines the categories, modes of accepted behavior and systems of interaction possible in a given social context. It is “the universalizing mediation which causes individual practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable.’”¹⁰ A *habitus* might be considered the necessary conditions for the maintenance of culturally specific ideologies, and the production of social subjects. The *habitus* both produces the practices of individuals and collectives, and it is that which individuals and collectives put into place. It is in this way that the *habitus* can be historical even when it operates largely on an unconscious level. A culture’s *habitus* is the testimony of the past that produced it, and it guarantees a kind of permanence against changes made by individuals.

Habitus describes a social field of human skills where each practice receives its signification in relation to the whole. It is also a philosophy of the body that is essentially phenomenological insofar as it is dependent upon life as experienced through this body. Social life produces a number of rules that one must obey in order to participate, but because these rules are followed largely unconsciously, they become a system of habits. For Bourdieu, self-presentation and representation are a central feature in the structure of the self; the masculine body, the feminine body, the black body, the white body, the bourgeois body, the working-class body all perform on a battle ground for social identification and positioning. Social agents should be understood as operating between their current social position and the direction of their inherent interests.

But if the online worlds constitute a kind of imaginary public *habitus*, what is their relation to a "real" public *habitus*? There can be little doubt that virtual worlds work to *activate* subjects by mediating individual practices in such a way as to make them "sensible" or "reasonable." In any virtual world, a *habitus* is generated to shape the possible forms of expression produced therein, and this virtual *habitus* will share characteristics and symptoms of other social spaces beyond the electronic domain. Ultimately, the space between zones of habitation – "real" and "virtual" – are imaginary, elastic, and porous. Here, I am in agreement with Elizabeth Grosz who wrote in her essay "Cyberspace, virtuality and the real,"

If we don't just have bodies, but are bodies, there can never be the threat of displacing body in favor of mind or abandoning the real for the virtual . . . This virtual is not a geometric, spatial, or technological concept, nor is it structured by phantasmatic or imaginary projections alone, rather it is the domain of latency or potentiality, given that the boundaries between the virtual and the real or the physical are unsustainable.¹¹

Grosz reads virtual worlds as part of a rich continuum of social and cultural artifacts that suggest a mapping of potential human relations, a kind of "augmentation, a supplementation, and a transformation of the real by and through its negotiation with virtuality."¹² In short, virtuality is not a repudiation of the real, but rather its extension, its reconstruction.

In this case, world ordering is about laying out the kinds of roles that can be played, either by setting the stage, offering the physical props, or delimiting the body types and even personalities of the social actors. To some degree it invites consideration of the very existential questions posed by Jean Paul Sartre, and rejected by Bourdieu, concerning the possibility of bad faith. For Bourdieu, we act out the roles that are ascribed to us by our social situation and the available resources around us, but, for Sartre, we are already in a conflicted relation with these ascribed roles, and act some of them out self-consciously, knowingly, and in bad faith. Is bad faith, in fact, the primary

mode of inhabiting virtual worlds? Does one play at identity in these public spaces in the same way that Sartre's famous waiter plays his required role, both with and against the systems and social structures already in place? Are not participants in artificial worlds inhabiting a gap between a factual existence and a transcendence of this existence?

Although they were intellectual adversaries, I would like to propose that both Sartre and Bourdieu are useful for thinking about the operative mode of artificial worlds as systems of representation – systems that are potentially political and public – that rely upon conformity and theatricality simultaneously. All participants must automatically conform to a specific type of theatricality unique to the ordering of the virtual world in question. At the same time, they do so with a self-consciousness that is more than a passive acquiescence, given that the worlds are structured on the model of role-playing games. A virtual *habitus* has the potential to function efficiently as a cultural and political experiment in social engineering for both progressive and ideological ends. This is why critical performances in these otherwise conformist worlds constitutes an important and, indeed, radical public action.

An early voice of critique within this new and growing "public" domain of imagined habitation was the performance group Desktop Theater. Since 1997 these artists have been engaging in an agit-prop theatrical intervention in graphical online worlds, such as The Palace, in order to draw attention to the social politics of the virtual space as well as the "real" world politics beyond. Adrian Jenik and Lisa Brenneis immediately grasped the political dimension of "acting" in artificial worlds, and quickly developed a series of staged vignettes that would engage the local *habitus* in a countervailing manner. One could say that they were acting in bad faith, but in good faith. Following is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with the artists in 2002.

Jenik: Desktop Theater (DT) is the live performance of theatrical inventions on the Internet. The practice was developed in a concentrated manner from the spring of 1997 through November 2001 by Adriene Jenik, Lisa Brenneis, and a shifting troupe of artist/writer/performers.¹³ The work is part "intentionalized performance" and part sociological analysis, albeit without a well-grounded method, or the illusion of being "outside" of the culture. Our first performance was a compressed version of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," and the most recent was an enactment of "Chicana is . . .," written and performed by five teenage girls in REACH LA's computer club. Our archive holds documentation of more than 50 productions, of varying length and development. Some ideas "succeeded." Some ideas "flopped." Not all performances were worked out beforehand. Some elicited voluminous response (often very different from that intended) and others were tacitly ignored.

Gonzalez: Why do you call Desktop Theater "street theater"? With what traditions are you in conversation?

Brenneis: When DT performs in public Palace chat rooms, we don't control the space where the performance takes place. This is the most important connection to street theater tradition.

Jenik: It was clear from the beginning that these online arenas were seeking to fulfill the role of a public street. This was a particularly apt metaphor in the early "supported" years of the Palace community in which there was a "Downtown" of sorts in the Palace Mansion. This "downtown" area was a heterogeneous palace that was both controlled (by a scattering of wizards) and unpredictable due to the nature of being a crossroads. At any time of the day or night, you could count on a continuously shifting population of about 150–250 people distributed throughout about 30 [virtual] rooms.

As we began to explore this space and imagine what was possible, I was curious to read more about street theater traditions, particularly as they related to social justice movements. I (though not necessarily Lisa, who balanced out my more didactic approach with her trickster presence) imagined these interventions to have a role in opening up public awareness of and dialogue around sociopolitical issues, so I began to read about earlier forms of theatrical interventions. A few friends pointed me toward Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre and Image Theater, and I became interested in the idea of the spect-actor, which seemed to precisely describe the position of the "audience" for DT work. I also read the work and essays of Polish theater director Tadeusz Kantor, and studied the Living Theatre in the Lower-East Side of Manhattan, and other sixties performance/conceptual art practices like "Happenings," the work of Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin. Of course each of these movements/practices has its own goals. We looked at these previous works as examples of what had been done and began to develop our own strategies for what we might contribute to the particular culture of this place [The Palace] as well as the historical moment taking place beyond the screen.

I should note that my background is in English literature and I had previously produced, directed, and participated in artworks that used language experiments as interventions into public discourse. Desktop Theater is in conversation with earlier media work as much as earlier theater work. It is also necessarily in dialogue with contemporary "gaming" culture – as a type of social performance hack.

Gonzalez: Please describe some of the range and variety of avatar-actors you have used.

Brenneis: Everything from single-pixel (invisible) avatars, to my own photo, to cartoon characters, to multi-avatar "expression sets" for a single character.

Jenik: As Lisa mentioned, it is a broad range depending on the piece, the environment it is performed in, and what type of activity/dialogue we are hoping to instigate. We use commonly represented and traded avatars

within The Palace (which have changed along with the shifts in Palace culture). We have also employed slightly modified versions of those cultural icons (as in *FatGirls* where Lisa added a few pixels to the expected width of the "normalized" teen girl avatar, or the widening of the "expression set" of the default roundhead avatars in "waitingforgodot.com" to include directional gestures and more subtle, complicated expressions of emotion than just happy, sad, angry).

Many times our avatars are wholly "handmade" – when done well, we get attention for our technical prowess and inventiveness, which encourages screen-dwellers to linger in the room and respond to something perceived of as "different."

In *Santaman's Harvest*, Desktop Theater's most ambitious work, three acts are populated by a range of avatars – most centrally "farmer" and "Santaman" who both have "expression sets" employed by DT actors (along with movement and text) to achieve greater dramatic effect. Santaman is composed of a basic "corporate manager" outline, filled in with institutional green and collaged with eyes and lips cribbed from magazines, forming expressions of confidence, charm, shock, and irritation, among others. The farmer is a simply drawn character in overalls who can express wonder, confusion, and finally, deep sorrow and angst at the death of the butterflies and destruction of his crops by the Cropatistas who themselves are a "group avatar" – one glob of counter-cultural multi-cultural teens pasted together. Hubris is an exploding, flashing mushroom cloud. Nearsightedness is a pair of large spectacled eyes. We also script motion into characters, as in the case of the butterflies in *Santaman's Harvest*. Each butterfly had three animated states, and was instructed to move the avatars through pixel-stuttering, which created a fragile, fluttering presence for an otherwise flat image.

Bush/Gore featured (as one might expect) cribbed Internet photographs of the presidential candidates positioned in various ways. I created 3 Gore states (earnestly listening, abashed, and confident deliverer of message) a few of which pointed in two directions. As we trolled through the rooms stumping for primary votes and regurgitating pre-digested lines from stump speeches, we solicited complicated and various responses; excitement, political followers, naysayers, serious debates on immigration policies, etc. The "image" of the avatar somehow even elicited belief in the authenticity of the candidates' visits on the part of the Palacians [Palace participants], something we never even remotely imagined.

Chicana is . . . avatars (made by the REACH LA team of youth) consisted of very dynamic looking images of young Chicana teen heads on cartoon bodies pictured in strong stances holding a series of red flags. They stood out boldly from the rest of the cyber-environment they entered.

Women in Black consisted of five staged vigils of three silhouetted women slowly and silently sliding through several palaces in the days

directly following 9/11. The effective "presence" of the black figures was created through their visual image, their movement, and their silence. This activity, which is a part of a worldwide feminist antiwar protest of the same name, elicited a large number of responses from fellow global citizens, as can be observed in the logs of the events.

Gonzalez: How do traditional or nontraditional conceptions of gender and sexuality figure into your interactions online?

Brenneis: The Palace is a very gender-plastic society. You may see traditional sex roles in play, but you have no way of knowing the gender or orientation of the person who is animating the avatar you are interacting with. We've seen plenty of examples of gender stereotyping online, and an equal number of incidents of age stereotyping. I suspect I'm well above the average age in Palace society (of course there's no way to know for sure). I found that revealing my true age (mid-forties) elicited fear and trembling among some younger (?) male (?) persons. Of course it's easy to pretend to be younger – an irresistible lure for tricksters.

Using big words in conversation had mixed results, depending on the current population in residence.

Jenik: Though it could be argued that gender is everywhere and always present in the discourse of Desktop Theater, a few moments to concentrate this discussion might be the *World of Park* and *Fatgirls* performances.

World of Park is a compressed performance of Yoko Ono's play *Grapefruit in the World of Park* documented in her book *Grapefruit*. Lisa and I divided the text into a dialogue, edited it down to a ten-minute performance and began to recite it in the Memorial Park room of The Palace mansion. The documented performance that remains (there were several others before and after, including rehearsals) includes two characters; Linc, a black 1970s Afro'ed paper-doll figure found and saved from an avatar-dispenser, and Trudi, a white freak-girl paper doll avatar who has been "stretched" a few pixels in width to make her appear overweight. Trudi figures strongly in *FatGirls* as well. The two characters speak, in different tones of voice, cryptic lines of poetry that seem to refer to objects and images in the frame of the screen, but also leak outside. An innocent denizen seems at first oblivious to their rambling and then annoyed at their address, their repetition, and their weirdness. There is a tension created between the two characters of Linc and Trudi, through their interracial engagement, the shared hallucination of their use of language, their proximity to one another and the other occupants of the room, and their use of crudely blocked space. One "woman" in the room tried to control us by calling us names and then, when others arrived, enlisting their help in shaming us. Below is a short excerpt of the compressed "script" from that performance.

L: Is it too cold?

T: It's too warm

L: The sky's too high
T: People turning up their stomachs contentedly toward the sky
L: Your voice sounds unusually small in the afternoon air
T: We must live
L: We must do something
T: Something constructive I guess
L: Let's not leave the room
T: Let's stay
L: Let's live longer
T: So we can drink tea together
L: That would be nice
T: But that's a dream

World of Park confounds certain expectations of gender in that the conversation between Linc and Trudi is fluid and rhythmic, and not sexualized. Trudi's body does not obey the "aesthetic rules" of the space, yet she is not presented as abject, rather, as an independent thinker. Often when gender is fixed in an avatar, there is not much room to move conceptually. In fact, one time when I was flipping through several avatars of different genders, onlookers responded with outrage, calling me a bisexual, shocked to see I was not authentically representing myself as one sex or the other.

The performance *Fatgirls* uses Trudi again, this time putting her center stage, and focusing on her physical difference. Two characters, Patti and Trudi, engage in a long improvisatory visit to a series of avatar trading rooms. Here, surrounded by "idealized" white female forms, drawn with their hands clasped coyly behind their backs, Trudi and Patti hold a discussion about their weight problems, referring not solely to their "real" bodies, but expanding this heart-to-heart to include their avatars, which have gained a few pixels over Christmas (the piece was performed in mid-January). The avatars drew a number of abusive comments, with locals exclaiming about how grotesque they looked. They also provoked a short discussion about the fact that some people find larger women attractive, and revealed the homogeneity in the room, by appearing "other than" the rest. A few people in the room changed into pregnant girl avatars, which I had never seen before.

In Desktop Theater, we are simultaneously mirroring and "performing" consciously and unconsciously our collective gender norms. Because we do not know who is really behind the mask, any analysis we make remains opaque. We often wonder, finally, to what extent angry responses to our provocations are really just performances of anger in the interest of provoking more drama.

Gonzalez: What kind of thinking goes into choosing the visual form of the avatar? How significant is this visual form to the theatrical experience for actor and audience?

Brenneis: You're working with an extremely limited visual representation online. You have freedom in your choice of appearance, but your size and motion are quite restricted. So the visual form is very important. Choosing an avatar size relative to the society at large is important depending on your artistic/social objective. Large avatars can be threatening, small non-threatening avatars are helpful if you're trying to draw others into a scene or activity.

Gonzalez: Do you think of Desktop Theater as a form of agit-prop?

Jenik: I can see a connection, though it is not a direct inspiration. Other projects I have worked on such as Paper Tiger TV have been similarly characterized.

Gonzalez: How does race appear or disappear in performances and interactions of Desktop Theater? Is whiteness presented as an ethnicity? If so, how?

Brenneis: Whiteness appears as an ethnicity as soon as avatars of another race make an appearance. One of the wonderful things about The Palace is that the range of avatars reaches far beyond the human, so there's an ethnicity of Big Square avatars, a race of Little Fairy avatars, etc. A single person can wear an avatar that appears as an interracial couple. It's possible for a single person to appear as an ethnic group. So race is elective. Of course most of the white kids on The Palace choose to appear as white . . . That's assuming those are white kids appearing in those white teenager cartoon bodies.

Jenik: Lisa's response works well here. In the Palaces we visited, in an ongoing exploration from 1997 to 2001, we rarely saw "avatars of color." Even in Palaces hosted in Mexico, or Japan. The "mostly white suburban" avatars traded and dispensed included vaguely Latino or Asian avatars, as well as some black avatars (boys come complete with guns and hiphop attire, girls with book-bags), but for the most part, race is normalized as white. As Lisa points out, many avatars are nonhuman, and therefore elide the question of race in their representation. Of course, the text that comes from the character reveals ethnicity over time. Often when we appear as avatars of color, not in DT pieces, but just informally, we are asked to share our avatar, perhaps because of its seeming "uniqueness."

I would add a few specific observations of ways in which race/ethnicity appear/disappear from DT performances. The *World of Park*, described above, is one example. Though Linc and Trudi do not have to be imaged black and white respectively, the fact that Linc is black and speaking in a lower voice shifts the meaning of the piece. Lisa and I do use the positions of the avatars, moving in relation to one another, as a type of language of flirtation, which certainly influences the way the piece is read.

Gonzalez: What do you know about your audience(s)? How does this affect the preparation and planning of your projects?

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Jenik: We know very little about our actual audiences, though we assume in general that our audiences are mostly much younger than us. We have bumped into linguistics professors and have made “friends” with denizens like Astral Savage, who knows a lot about history. Through the Palace Developers Group list-serve, I can see that the server hosts are spread throughout North America, Europe, and Japan for the most part.

We try to find out what’s going on in a room (over time is best) before we stage a performance in it. This is especially important now, since the bankruptcy of Communities.com and the loss of software support. The situation in most Palaces is more akin to a living room than a public street, so we need to be particularly responsive to the environment or we’ll be “killed” or “banned” from the server in a short time.

Gonzalez: How does gesture figure into your work? What is an online gesture? (Why are text balloons sometimes called gestures?)

Jenik: In visual chat rooms, though text is still a central part of the exchange, gesture can also move outside of the realm of text. If I think of gesture more broadly as expression or dramatic punctuation, I can outline several approaches we have used during the course of DT experiments. Movement from one part of the “stage” or window to the other is extremely important, both in terms of creating the relationship of the character to the space (Palacians naturally do this as part of their normal scene), but also to challenge the space of the other characters. There is a strong effect created when an avatar “sidles” up to another avatar. Movement, as noted above, in The Palace is achieved through clicking anywhere on the screen you want your avatar to go, or by using the arrow keys to move pixel-by-pixel in top/bottom/left/right directions.

Besides movement, next in importance is directionality (shifting a character to focus his/her range of sight). This was particularly useful in the camera avatar DSX-2000 in *Santaman’s Harvest*. The camera was a silent character, but through her constant refocusing of direction was able to unsettle onlookers, or, alternatively, create a kind of “media spotlight” that focused the action of the scene.

A text balloon can reach the status of a gesture (dramatic punctuation) when it is rendered in a fashion that calls attention to its emotional state. Throughout our performances we alternate between the default state cartoon balloon and a spiky balloon that indicates excitement or yelling, and a thought balloon (where we can play on another level of thought from the dialogue actually spoken).

I discussed expression sets above, and these, of course, can incorporate physical gestures as well as expression. All of this, done live, is quite a bag of tricks for a performer. As such, we really do feel as though we are performing when we put on a show – we are even exhausted afterward (the practice is hard to sustain for more than an hour we’ve found).

Gonzalez: What kind of "world" does Desktop Theater inhabit? What are the presuppositions about this world? What are its ideological boundaries? Can we properly call the "location" of Desktop Theater a world?

Brenneis: My artistic impulses tend towards seeking out locations where social protocols and convention have not yet become metastasized, and there's a chance to engage people before they have "figured it out," and hardened their cool stance. It's as much for me as for them. DT is a large sphere of possibility and surprise compressed into a small 2-D space.

Jenik: Well, ideally, we understand Desktop Theater as a larger practice that is not bounded solely by our experiments in The Palace software/community, but that extends out to include other examples of "intentional" performance in other online games and chat spaces. As such, it would not inhabit a single world, but rather multiple parallel worlds that are constantly changing. The presuppositions are the basic tools: access to computer, the Internet, and, perhaps most importantly, time to invest in involvement in such a culture. The need for these basic requirements means that its ideological boundaries, though porous, are shaped by the relatively wealthy people who inhabit it.

The ideological boundaries of such "worlds" are in many ways clearly (though often unconsciously) outlined through the structuring of technical protocols, interfaces, security measures (often indistinguishable from technical protocols), and "rules" of game play. The way that the motive for profit is affecting the development of these tools is the subject of a video essay that Lisa and I are currently researching and producing (called Company Town).

Gonzalez: What do you think the future will be for this kind of theatrical intervention? What new direction is Desktop Theater taking?

Brenneis: The possibilities are there. The desire to do connected live theater is there. It depends on the future of the tools. The Palace is an underground tool now, the company that owned it went out of business. The Palace is unique in the representational freedom it offers users. It's unique in that it does not impose a game structure on inhabitants, and it's easy to learn so non-techies can participate. It's unique in its low-bandwidth requirements and Mac/PC compatibility. Any future for this kind of theater depends on a future for these kinds of tools.

Jenik: Lisa's answer echoes my own.

As a new form of social engagement, Desktop Theater has successfully worked to inject a sense of discomfort or dissent into otherwise comfortable online worlds that might otherwise be limited to the equivalent of "company towns." As Lisa Brenneis points out at the end, the artists' working conditions are determined by the available tools and platforms made available for creative interaction. In this context, it is slightly chilling to learn that another web site called "Worlds.com" has secured a US Patent

on scalable 3-D multi-user, interactive, virtual world systems. Worlds.com states:

Our intention is to market this technology to our current partners as well as to organizations, companies, and other sites that have been looking for new and unique ways to involve mass audiences in their products, applications and services. We will also review other 3D sites who may be using our technology to ensure we are fully compensated.

Foucault observes that "we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions."¹⁴ I am not so pessimistic, though I do think that the Worlds.com patent on virtual worlds is a symptom, a warning: the idea of the "public" in online virtual worlds will continue to be a contested issue. The members of Desktop Theater suggest that to be part of the "public" in virtual worlds includes the right to create representations and to transform the discourse of that space, even if it makes other members uncomfortable. The right to speak, the right to represent, the ability to form dissent in worlds on line is not a simple matter of pluralist pronouncements or creation of zones of comfort, but is finally, as with the political world outside it, a complex negotiation with systems – and rights – of representation.

Notes

- 1 Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1964, p. 17.
- 2 Before *Alpha World*, there were other virtual worlds, notably *Habitat*. Originally conceived by Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar in 1985, *Habitat* became a marketed product when it was distributed by Fujitsu in 1990. When the original *Habitat* was upgraded to the newer *Habitat II* in 1994 it claimed to be: "An expanding world of virtual communities: You can design your own world in cyberspace, and enjoy communicating with other people in the virtual world. Since 1990, the Fujitsu Habitat multimedia communication service has been offering dreams to its users."
- 3 Online. Available HTTP: [//us1.worlds.net/3DCDup/help/FAQS.HTM](http://us1.worlds.net/3DCDup/help/FAQS.HTM) (accessed September 23, 2004).
- 4 "Interview with Ron Britvich, Author and Programmer of Worlds Inc.'s *Alpha World*" in *Online Magazine*. Online. Available HTTP: www.online-magazine.com/britvich1.htm (accessed September 23, 2004).
- 5 Online. Available HTTP: www.activeworlds.com/3dhomepage/ (accessed September 23, 2004).
- 6 Margaret Morse, "Nature morte," in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, Mary Anne Moser, ed., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, p. 227.
- 7 Roy Ascott, *The Telematic Embrace: Visionary Theories of Art, Technology and Consciousness*, Edward A. Shanken, ed., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003, p. 277.

- 8 Ibid., p. 279.
- 9 Margaret Morse, "Nature morte," p. 227.
- 10 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 79.
- 11 Elizabeth Grosz, "Cyberspace, virtuality and the real," in *Architecture from the Outside*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001, p. 90.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Jack Waters, Tania Kamal-Eldin, Stephen Ausbury, Sue Gautsch, Constance Samaras, Lindsay Browne, Michael Convertino, Peter Kramer, Helen Varley Jamieson, Leslie Sharpe, Andrea Slane, Nancy Reilly-McVittie, Jonathon Delacour, Elia Arce, Erwin Veytia, John Rouse, Sue-Ellen Case, Tony Allard, Kristine Diekman, and others have participated in one or more DT experiments.
- 14 Michel Foucault, "What is enlightenment," *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, ed., New York: Pantheon, 1984, p. 46.