Body surf & Meat sport

-intimacy beyond biology
by Stahl Stenslie, 1996.

It is night in Telepolis, our future home in cyberspace, the Work-zone has changed to Rave-zone, the monotonous info-surf of your digital workspace is replaced with hot bits of darker desires... Contemplating your virtual wardrobe you start to wonder what sex you will jack into, which body will suit your fluid appetite. Now, what is the nature of these virtual bodies? What will you experience? In what kind of body??

Of the major problems confronting us in the emerging communication society the questions concerning intimacy ranks high. What will sex in the future be like? How will we do it? And with whom? Although simplistic and of naive nature, these questions touch what seems to be a primary fear [1] for our society turning autistic, reclusive and inhuman through the replacement of the good, old fashioned face-to-face, body-to-body interaction with sterile High-Tech prostheses and tele-present networking.

It is essential to deal with these and similar issues on a less emotional and more inquiring level as our sensual and passionate future will be highly influenced by the global network-society that's built right now. A future that soon will be felt through a computer near you.... Considering the non-physical fabric of cyberspace we must first of all come to terms with communication without our real-life bodies.

In the following I will discuss problems concerning the conditions for the experience of intimacy in cyberspace(2) by touching upon some aspects of the constitution of post-biological constructions known as virtual personalities [3].

1: No-Bodies

Encounters in cyberspace are essentially bodiless. So is its sex. At least in the traditional sense of defining corporeality. So how to have sex without the biologically prerequisite of a physical body? The paradox of communication within virtual spaces is that -contrary to the popular opinion- rather than getting rid of the body it creates a need and a market for MORE bodies - both bodies of representation (virtual) as well as sensation (real). In effect the nature of on-line communication turns what might seem as bodiless sex into a body dependent sex. This follows as a consequence of the virtual personalities constitution.

1.1 Virtual Personalities (VP)

Virtual personalities can be described as post-human, post-biological constructs. Their “virtually real” manifestations are living and experiential on-line - usually through a textual description -so called handles- [4], through 3D manifestations -as so called Avatars or VIDs (Virtual IDentity) [5], or a combination of both textual description and visual design [6].

Their nature is hybrid; part digital, part human. Although they can only be “digitally” experienced as on-line, fantastical constructs of (more or less) poetic constitution, they are
symbiotically living with a real, physical human being. This modern centaur is an instable construct, a fluid character, lightly schizophrenic, likely to morph into other manifestations/personalities parallel to the will and emotional condition of its human “parent”. The virtual “I” can have any sex, any shape and any qualities allowed by the Net-medium. On the anthropomorphic MUD “Furry Muck” all handles are met in animalistic form and acting with animalistic qualities [7].

Virtual personalities are essential to interpersonal communication in and through Cyber-space as they allow their human component to slip into the virtual role model needed to interface to others. Interpersonal communication over the Net can be defined as a phenomenon grounded upon fantastical constructs interfaced together within consensual hallucinations, and rendered real through their human counterpart.

1.2 Personality loops

If it had not been for the “Eigenleben” Virtual personalities obtain on-line they could be seen as virtual marionettes serving their puppet masters wills. However, living through a VP in cyberspace seem to create some kind of “cyborganism-ical” feedback loop between the personal VP and the real personality (RP). I observe my virtual personality from an outside point of view both as my acting self and as-a consequence of the reaction from the environment and other VPs- my external, sensing body.

The real and virtual personality has entered the mirror of Lacan. Identity becomes a phenomenon grounded upon reflection and projection. The real personality (RP) observes its VP construction, identifying with it but simultaneously reacting to it as outside of himself. Responding to the experience inside of virtual environments the RP edits its VP and the personality loop is entered. - even if the RP is aware of the VPs hallucinational constitution he reflects himself in it, allows himself to be influenced by it. Implicitly the VP can so be described as a host independent constructs - taking on a life of its own. The emerging symbiotic constitution assembled by the real and virtual self can be described as a post-biological cyborganism.

2: NOW-bodies

The Virtual Personality is an editable, changeable construct. It is so a now-body - a temporary body both conditioned to and existing as a consequence of the immediate, oscillating desires of the RL (Real Life) host. Intimacy on the Net so fundamentally distinguishes itself from relationships in RL. On the one side the “I” become a variable, on the other -inside the matrix of connectivity- having a single-object-of-desire soon looses meaning since he/she/it has mutated into a (potential) multiple-construct and an object in transience, Intimacy is suddenly means linking fluid bodies and changing qualities. Who are you, and in what kind of body? We have entered the Zone of Body Surf, the Zone of changing bodies and experimental sensations. Both the “you” and the “I” can be anyone, at anytime. Or can they?

Maybe our virtual identities and digital doubles are only impotent icons of discontinuous imagination? Are not cybernauts too busy surfing digital reality to reconnect to the substance of life: the body? What can one really sense through a non-located VP?
2.1 Meat-sport

Although fluid of nature the VP does well retaining a certain credibility and stability. In the role-play of RL F2F (face-to-face) communication we are used to affixing others with certain qualities. This characterizing makes them predictable and hence giving us better control and influence over the communication-process.

The inquiry into the “true” nature of virtual personalities is a part of the meat-sport experienced on-line. Meat sport can be defined as the attempt to unveil the true personality behind the virtual flesh of the VP. Any female VP could be a man, or vice versa, or even a computer constructed personality [8]. Conditioned to the play with masks most users of on-line chat environments indirectly query the real sex of the other. In the most frequent case the beautiful woman turns out to be a college boy. The “fatale” consequence of such a revelation usually terminates the consensual fantasy - but it does not make it less fun. The Now-body lives on - revealed, mutated or re-combined.

3: KNOW-bodies

The bodies of cyberspace can also be described as know-bodies; bodies of which the real personality has knowledge and consciousness. Without awareness of the VPs assigned qualities it looses it function as intentional communication tool - although keeping its value as attractor. [9] Establishing a spontaneous awareness of ones know-body is hard without the proper feedback. This remains one of the main problems within the low sensory resolution of the present cyberspaces. Most virtual worlds anticipates a well developed memory in the mind of the real personality. One of the most intuitive systems so far is CompuServes Worlds Away; a cartoon like, visual 2D world giving the 3rd perspective of both your own and other bodies.

Forgotten yourself? Attach a sticker on your monitor. Or stickers for those with hang to multiples.

3.1: Psycho technological personality

One of the psycho technological applications of the Know-body is to serve as a framework for the construction of experience. Through the personality loop it stimulates the RP into specific responsive conditions. The Know-body iconifies the RPs momentaneous preferences and so becomes a tool for the achievement of Real Life (RL) sensations:

“what is the champagne dinner followed by soft music and low lighting but an induction technique aimed at producing specific states of body/mind and behavior?” Julian Isaacs, Ph.D

Similarly to the traditional wine/candles/music tricks of Verführung the Know-body functions as a legitimate psycho technological tool to induce specific emotional responsiveness and sensations. The challenge posed to intimate relations on the Net is how to cope with the inherent instability of this tool. How do we go about with our own non-coherent personalities?

4: Body Tech
At present the psycho-physical relationship between the real and virtual personality is more mental than physical. Interfaces to virtual realities are almost exclusively audiovisual and/or textual, that is, based upon text, voice, sound, pictures, movies or immersive 3D environments of low resolution.

As consequence, not taking the individuals auto-erotic self-stimulation into concern, cyber-spaces have poor sensory resolution.

Stimulation of the senses of smell, taste and touch have so far found little attention. This is partly due to the technical difficulties of reproducing realistic sensations, but stimulation of the body also seem to be an area of taboo within the scientific communities. Stimulating the sick body so that pain is not felt is legitimate use of body stimulation, but any movement above the flat-line of ordinary sensations into the regions of pleasurable feelings seem doomed to be branded “porno” or “entertainment” - which is, of course, not “scientific”.... The question remains when a lack of sensuality becomes a lack of experience?

However, implementing complex multisensorial stimuli and tactile feedback into the corpus of the VP is not impossible, and the use of Sensoric clothing -as in some of my projects (10)- promise to bring in a dimension of fatal reality into the otherwise psychological perception of the VP:

4.1 Beyond the limits of technology

Could Body-tech really change sexual habits? What will happen when one can have physical sex on large scale on-line? At present the on-line community is dominated by highly sexed men in the twenties and the thirties. The ration between real men and real women in on-line communication forum is about 9 to 1. In cyberspace however, the transsexual phenomenon of cross-dressing is not uncommon as you will find a much higher percentage of female virtual personalities, maybe between 25 to 30 percent. When we get used to having physical sex via tele-tactile stimulation how will this influence our RL sexual behavior ? It might not change biology, but it could influence our society massively by re-directing the libido of the masses, making sex a non-gender specific phenomenon , making Homo-erotic behavior the normal for future generations.

4.2: Terminal Love

Clothed in post-biological skin, what about Love-as-we-knew-it? What about the intimate factors of caring, nursing, proximity, tenderness that we know from stable relationships? Will it all be sacrificed for the casual intergalactic cyber-fucks and mass orgies?

Although moderately poly-sexual, most humans seem to prefer having one partner at a time. There are very strong reasons to find and stay with Real Life partners, both biological and economical. The desire for physical coitus has a strong lobby in our DNA structure- not at least because it is the engine of biology.

Rather than being a question of replacing RL relationships and biological desires, intimacy on the Net will more likely fill them out. The fluid character of virtual personalities gives cy-
Bernauts the potential to attract a greater selection of partners and -not at least- the ability to test out the human manifold of (sexual) preferences. In short; body surfing functions as a form of self-therapy.

5: re-combinant transsspecies

This scratching on the surface of the virtual personality's constitution indicates some of its characteristic as NO-, NOW- and KNOW-bodies - both how it interfaces to- and differs from the real personality. A consequence of the VPs fluid constitution is the surfing of different body manifestations and the sport of bodily reality-check. Although immaterial and hallucinatory of nature, the virtual body so effectuates a stronger body dependent relationship between the VP and the RP. The physical person incorporates its various virtual manifestation into reality, giving them ideally access to a sensuous existence. Surfing the fictional constructs of virtual bodies provides a therapeutical tool whose emotional impact is yet vague. Will our emotional future inside the flesh grinding Zone of Virtual Bodies be different from today?

What did Jaron Lanier see as the ultimate VR experience? To dance as a Crystal Octopus on the rim of Jupiter? Why not? Welcome to your future as a bio-recombinant Transspecies....

This article was featured in Telepolis

[1] For instance as presented in the movie “Metropolis” by Fritz Lang
[2] cyberspaces can be defined as through computer constructed environments
[3] I use the term VP as a fictional construct as different from the factual VP storing your personal information, as used by banks and officials to check info/credibility.
[4] ref. to MUDs; Multi User Dungeons, real-time object-oriented text environments
[7] f.ex. “Alendia, a very attractive squirreloid with her red fur clinging damply to her body, and a few droplets of water trickling down from her cutely upturned nose...she is completely nude before you.....” Wired, March 94
[8] One of the most famous ones is called “Lisa” and can be encountered in several MUDs.
[9] Once logged in as the well shaped “Jacqueline” on one of CompuServes adult channels I got about fifty pop-up windows containing private invitations.....