

OMNISCIENCE, SURVEILLANCE, DISCIPLINE: THE TRIUMPH OF THE VIRTUAL PANOPTICON

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Virtual worlds like Second Life and games privilege a single point-of-view and permit a change of identity thought to be desirable, liberating and fun. Users/players agree to Terms of Service (TOS) – a new feudal regime of ‘soft’ surveillance. Foucault’s analysis of Bentham’s Panopticon applies equally to typical Terms of Service. The mummified Jeremy Bentham, locked in perpetuity in a box, remains omnipresent and omniscient.

The eyes of the Lord are in every place. _Proverbs 15:3

POV

Artists, authors, filmmakers, game design and creators of virtual worlds have at their command a variety of devices to represent the point-of-view (POV) of the observer, character, playable character or avatar. In the long history of visual representation in western, non-western art along with the rise of modernism, contemporary arts but also in technical disciplines geometric perspective is but one of many different approaches. Although it actually distorts depictions of objects it retains the authority of truth. Technical drawing techniques such as isometric projections (or God’s Eye view) and even surrealism have explored alternative modes of representation of perspective.

The Privileged Gaze

Virtual worlds such as Second Life privilege a single point-of-view, i.e. the user. When logged into Second Life a user sees the virtual world from a default viewpoint, which is from slightly above and behind the user's avatar (the user's alter ego ‘in-world’). This point-of-view is as if the user were viewing his or her avatar using a (monocular) camera floating a few feet behind it. The user can also choose to see this virtual world from “inside the head” of one’s avatar as if seeing through the eye(s) of the avatar. In effect the user can easily shift from a first person, to third person (their avatar is seen as an other). Using the technique called Mouse Look users can even move that camera completely independent of his/her avatar and become an incorporeal all seeing-eye freed from the bondage of a body.

Scopophilia

This privileging of a single point-of-view matches Mulvey’s notion of scopophilia “a primordial desire for pleasure in seeing.” There is a sense of discovery, freedom and liberation as a result of un-tethering one’s point-of-view from the location of one’s avatar. In Second Life user’s avatars can also fly—long a dream of human kind. Flying affords a bird’s eye perspective on the virtual world. In addition teleportation permits avatars to instantly move (within technical limitations – laggy rezzing) from one location (another sim or simulation) on the grid in Second Life. For Second Life “newbies” this experience is liberating and even ecstatic.

We all live in a Gray Submarine

Jaron Lanier suggests that we tend to think of the brain as a computer and our point-of-view as seen through our eyes as a simple camera:

“The head is a spy submarine sent on a mission to perform a multitude of little experiments to learn more about its environment. These micro-experiments are often carried out by constant, subtle changes of the position of the head. By continually moving our head around in order to scan the scene, we simulate the effect of having far better eyes than we actually do, and in a far wider variety of placements. ...If you immobilize your head in a vise, you will see far less well. If you also stop the motion of your eyeballs, you will soon cease to see at all. The world seems to vanish into gray.”

Escape

Second Life also tempts the user with the lure of transformation and perfection. In Second Life the user's avatar is that body electric that triumphs over the human condition and promises a consumer's paradise of fulfillment. A promotional video on the Second Life web site answers the question of “What is Second Life?” with:

A place to be...

Be different

Be yourself

Free yourself

Free your Mind

Change your Mind

Our Second Selves

In her book *Life on the Screen* Sherry Turkle (1995) documents the hopes, fears, expectations of some of early denizens of the then emerging social phenomena of the Internet. She argues that these technologies bring “postmodernism down to earth,” “refuses modernist resolutions and requires an openness to multiple viewpoints.” In an article for *Wired* magazine she spoke of the virtual: “The anonymity of MUDs gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones.”

But easily changing point-of-view has ramifications. The practice of using multiple avatars requires a transformation of identity and personality. When a user 'enacts' the identity of a particular avatar, their 'real' personality is masked by the assumed personality. In real life such change can lead to psychological distress. In virtual worlds and games a change in identity or point-of-view is thought to be desirable, liberating and fun.

Two Heads are Better Than One

I have argued that virtual worlds like Second Life may induce a feeling of dissociation in users/players. Users may experience “derealization” (where objects appear unreal) and “depersonalization” (where people read avatar’s appear unreal or robotic) as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV). If dissociation is experienced in real life it can be very debilitating and disruptive of normal life.

Reality Testing Is Intact

The clinical diagnosis of either of depersonalization or derealization indicates that “reality testing is intact” which applies to Second Life Residents and gamers. By changing gender, bodily features, proportions and clothing a Second Life resident “enacts” a different personality. With a different personality, especially in the case of gender comes a different perspective on the experience of being “in world.” It is possible residents of Second Life or gamers experience something akin to Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) which according to the DMS refers to the “presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states” that “recurrently take control” of the user’s behavior. Could the user/player experience some form of cognitive dissonance if there is a struggle to integrate the different personality attributes and gender differences?

Various studies show that avatar selection can have a profound impact on behavior and self-perception both ‘in world’ and in the real life. VR researcher Nick Yee found that research subjects who adopted a taller avatar would out-negotiate those who selected shorter avatars. Commenting on Yee’s work, Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailenson conclude, “changes in avatar height changed their (study participants) behavior,” and that the “critical finding is that participants’ self-perceptions changed their behavior.”

Separation of Church and State

Extropia DaSilva considers the question how to manage the separation between one’s real self and a digital person:

“To what extent is a digital person separate from the person who is role-playing them? Many consider it impossible to create and sustain a personality that is substantially different from the RL persona. Others argue that current virtual reality is too crude to enable deep immersion into an alternate identity. As on-line worlds grow in sophistication, it should enable increasingly complex explorations of alternate identities.”

Liberation Theology

The prophets of the singularity see only the upside of multiple selves. With his proposal for the Law of Accelerating Returns Ray Kurzweil has prophesized the advent of the Singularity. We will be able to upload our minds to the cloud based on what Randal Koene terms “advancing substrate independent minds” (ASIM): “Mind uploading is the process of transfer, a process by which that which constitutes a specific mind is transferred from one substrate (e.g. the biological brain) to another (e.g. a silicon brain).” Will we retain our unique minds with different perspectives?

The Problem Concerning Technology

In the Winter 1993 issue of Whole Earth Review, Vinor Vinge raises many of the key issues surrounding the significance and impact of the Singularity:

“The notion of ego and self-awareness has been the bedrock of the hardheaded rationalism of the last few centuries.”

“What happens when pieces of ego can be copied and merged, when the size of a self-awareness can grow or shrink to fit the nature of the problems under consideration?”

Know Thy Selves

Extropia DaSilva provides a compelling vision of the coming future of multiple viewpoints:

“By the time mind uploading is generally available, perhaps people will have forgotten a time when a singular self was “normal.” They will be used to multiple viewpoints, their brains processing information coming not only from their local surroundings, but also from the remote sensors and cyberspaces they are simultaneously linked to.”

Exodus

In Exodus to the Virtual World, Edward Castronova sees “a hurricane coming” - the fun revolution, which he calls ‘practical virtual reality.’ Castronova points to basic economic theory of time allocation. All things being equal e.g. cost people “will pursue as long as possible activities that please them.” Castronova argues that the domain of synthetic worlds and the domain of the real world are in competition. “Time and attention are migrating from the real world into the virtual world. The exodus will strengthen, I believe. Improvements in technology will make virtual worlds into veritable dreamlands. They will be more fun, for more people. Simple economic theory predicts that in this competition, the real world is going to lose.”

Code is Law

While MMORPGs, virtual worlds and electronic games seek to provide a fun experience, all require that the users/players agree to Terms of Service (TOS). TERMS OF SERVICE according to Castronova fall into two categories: “One set of rules are proscriptions the designers hope players will follow more or less based on their own incentives. ...designers hope that a role-playing community will evolve that will enforce in-character behavior through its own norms.” The other class of rules “are ones that cannot be placed in code but about which the designers are dead serious..... The designers will execute any character that violates such rules, banning the associated account. E.g. harassment of other players on ethnic grounds.”

Lawrence Lessig famously wrote that “Code is law” and what is coded serves to ensure discipline and compliance. Castronova points out that “The cost of law enforcement, and of governance in general, is high now, higher than it has ever been in human history.” “To sustain good government, we either have to pay for people to do it, or figure out ...to automate it. ...The result of automated law in virtual worlds often feels like anarchy. You don’t ever see government—no police, no civil service workers, no mayors, only the occasional “game-master,” who has to come adjudicate problematic disputes. While gover-

nance is not apparent, governing is going on—in the code.” “We already have cameras that capture traffic violations and send tickets. Eventually the traffic light could speak directly to my car and simply prevent it from moving forward when the light is red.” Automated Real-world law is cheap! “Cheapness is a very powerful feature.”

The New Softcore Feudal Order

Rather than liberating TOS is a regime of ‘soft’ surveillance. Most include provisions that content created by users cannot infringe on the intellectual property rights of a third party; users agree to indemnify the owner of the virtual world from liability; all content created by users becomes the property of the virtual world owner and the owner retains the right to cancel a user’s account anytime for any reason. According to Greg Lastowka submission to the TOC is equivalent to a new feudal order: “Like peasants tilling fields around a medieval castle, users will lend their copyright labor and creativity in ways that will build the value of the virtual world platform, often paying for the privilege of doing so.” The end user licenses and terms of use regulate behavior.

Keeping Score

To enforce TOC and to make us feel part of something epic means tracking gamers and gameplay in order to provide feedback and recognition. This sense of the collective, being part of something larger is laudable, perhaps as McGonigal claims truly inspires awe, reverence and even humility. But we are reminded here of Blascovich and Bailenson’s rather innocuous sounding observation detailing the wonders of tracking systems: “The take-home message here is that people’s behaviors in virtual reality (Halo is indeed a virtual world-mine) are tracked, and therefore can be stored, analyzed, and used—for good, bad, or whatever the person collecting the information wants.”

The Ocean of Noise

On August 2, 2002 at the DARPA Tech 2002 Conference in Anaheim, California, Admiral John Poindexter (of the Iran-Contra scandal) rolled out the Total Information Awareness Program, sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Administration (DARPA). The vision for TIA was vast in scope and comprehensive and continues to this day under different through separate and parallel governmental, corporate and private initiatives.

“The most serious asymmetric threat facing the United States is terrorism, a threat characterized by collections of people loosely organized in shadowy networks that are difficult to identify and define and whose goals are the destruction of our way of life. The intelligence collection targets are thousands of people whose identities and whereabouts we do not always know. It is somewhat analogous to the anti-submarine warfare problem of finding submarines in an ocean of noise - we must find the terrorists in a world of noise, understand what they are planning, and develop options for preventing their attacks.”

In order for TIA to work effectively it must collect in its data mining operation the profiles of non-threats in order to distinguish the threats from the non-treats. Today we now know that the National Security Agency beginning in 2001, with the cooperation of the major domestic telecommunication providers intercepted Americans’ phone calls and Internet communications in violation of privacy safeguards established by Congress and the U.S. Constitution.

LOCATION BASED SERVICES

Today in the United States Apple and Google have launched their own data mining and tracking submersibles into the consumer info ocean of noise. With the spread of location-based advertising, marketing, or other applications both Apple and Google have been tracking the location of smart-phone and computer users. Apple surreptitiously logged the locations of cell phone towers and wifi hotspots adjacent iPhone and iPad users. CNET reported that while Google's Street View cars shot images for Google Earth, the vehicles also "collected the locations of millions of laptops, cell phones, and other Wi-Fi devices around the world."

Mr. Know it all

Google ex-CEO Eric Schmidt declared: "We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about." In many ways Eric Schmidt echoes Psalm 139 of the Christian Bible:

LORD, when you look at me you know all about me.

You know when I sit down.

And you know when I get up.

You understand what I am thinking about? (even when you are) far away.

The Police

With the 1983 hit "Every Breath you Take" by the Police, Sting takes us from the sacred to the profanity of stalking. Like the omniscience of God, Sting is letting the object of his affection know that "I'll be watching you."

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

During an interview in December of 2009 Google Chairman Eric Schmidt served users of the internet notice: "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place." This statement perfectly captures late eighteenth century English Philosopher Jeremy Bentham's idea of The Inspection Principle outlined in his proposal for the Panopticon – his "plan for a penitentiary inspection-house." The architecture is the physical realization of the Inspection Principle made possible by "the centrality of the inspector's situation, combined with the well-known and most effectual contrivances for seeing without being seen" made possible by a strategic placement of windows and partitions.

While it would be ideal to have each and every prisoners under "inspection" all the time Bentham acknowledges that is impossible (given limitations of staffing), so "the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so." Fear of detection ensures prevention is the essence of Bentham's inspection principle. This operational principle of the Panopticon induces "a new mode of obtaining

power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example." In his analysis of Bentham's Panopticon Foucault describes the inspection principle this way "to induce in the inmate (user) a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."

Here, there and everywhere

Now a trope of popular culture (the reality TV show Big Brother, Cheaters, MTV) the most visible manifestation of the virtual panopticon is ubiquity of security cameras. The London Evening Standard reported in an article entitled George Orwell, Big Brother is watching your house that as of 2007:

"Use of spy cameras in modern-day Britain is now a chilling mirror image of Orwell's fictional world, created in the post-war Forties in a fourth-floor flat overlooking Canonbury Square in Islington, North London. On the wall outside his former residence - flat number 27B - where Orwell lived until his death in 1950, an historical plaque commemorates the anti-authoritarian author. And within 200 yards of the flat, there are 32 CCTV cameras, scanning every move."

Dummy cameras provide the omnipresent threat of omniscience that ensures the internalization of compliance.

Smile We Are All On Candid Camera

Facebook adds over 100 million names each day, which rivals any database that the government might build. Google is not far behind. David Petrou an engineer at Google says that Google facial recognition software can identify the face of someone with a minimum of 17 online photos. With 50 or more Google can determine the person's name in most cases. Consumers willingly opt in this facial recognition software without concern. However, last year, a facial recognition system picked out more than 1,000 cases that resulted in State Police investigations, officials say. And some of those people are guilty of nothing more than looking like someone else.

It All in Your Head

The Brain Electrical Oscillations Signature test, or BEOS, was developed by Champadi Raman Mukundan, was used to win a criminal conviction. Using the scanning system, the accused murderer said nothing. But incriminating regions of the accused's brain where memories are stored lit up when the crime was recounted, ...The judge endorsed [the prosecutors's] assertion that the scans were proof of "experiential knowledge" of having committed the murder, rather than just having heard about it. The implication of such invasive techniques is also on uncertain ethical and legal ground.

Theory of the Future: The PANOPTICON

Invasive scanning techniques and brain implants were once the province of dystopian science fiction. Big Brother was a nightmare scenario of a fictional world that seems improbable in liberal open societies. The natural desire to see, to watch, to record, to remember is being harnessed through social media. The job of surveillance is being done by the consumer and it is fun. Users accept Terms of Service without reading and thereby agree to a regime of enforcement and compliance. Discipline is enforced because users know they might be watched and might suffer the ultimate penalty: denial of service.

The mummified Jeremy Bentham remains omnipresent at University College London. His frozen gaze suggests omniscience. He leaves us with this warning:

"...whether the liberal spirit and energy of a free citizen would not be exchanged for the mechanical discipline of a soldier, or the austerity of a monk? - and whether the result of this high-wrought contrivance might not be constructing a set of machines under the similitude of men?"

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