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Critical Theory: James Clifford and Culture for a Cyber World

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Introduction

As part of my Professional Seminar course as a doctorate student, I was asked to write a paper describing where my research interests were directed and what I hoped to accomplish during my academic program. At the time, I was involved in online learning and thought I would be a credit to my employer by trying to find a connection between learning styles and delivery methods. The proprietary university I worked for was looking at alternative means by which to deliver curriculum in order to improve retention. My writing assignment reflected this interest and looked into how unprepared incoming college students were from a technology standpoint, and what could motivate them to use technology as a tool for learning with the same fervor they used the Internet for social networking.

At the same time, my employer was considering the use of virtual spaces as a legitimate teaching environment for some of our students. The University used an activity-based learning model, and the emergence of environments such as Second Life enable students to create avatars (digital representations) that can build and program items as if they were real. For example, one of our computer science professors used Second Life to demonstrate her students' software engineering skills. Instead of having them write rote programs, she gave them the opportunity to work in Second Life, building amusement park rides. If the rides or arcades did what they were supposed to, then the software test worked. This created an amazingly immersive environment for those students who opted to use the 3D environment.

By the end of my first year in my doctorate program (which coincided with my first year in Second Life), I realized the future of learning is not in learning styles and delivery methods; it will be in how we can create a virtual experience that feels like a physical experience. At that moment, the focus of my research shifted. While I was enamored with virtual spaces as a

learning environment, I was more fascinated by what influenced a participant to choose one particularly identity over another when creating their avatar. Some were idealistic versions of supermodels, some were furry creatures, some were vampires, and some a composite of attributes. What people chose to become created an identity, unique and possibly very different than the identity they have in the real world. With this identity comes the issue of culture; the ability to participate synchronously in three-dimensions, anonymously, with people from all over the globe not only crumbled historical cultural barriers, it caused new cultures to be created – those that only exist in cyberspace.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the work of critical theorist James Clifford, who has also examined how historical cultures change when modernity challenges tradition. Clifford is a traditional cultural anthropologist; someone who sees culture as a bounded entity-an activity system that is perpetuated by the traditional activities that identify a particular group. Clifford looks not only at the political power that creates culture and controls access, but also what happens when modernity challenges tradition, bringing change to a culture that challenges power and creates something more of a “hybrid,” where cultural boundaries are crumbled by “expanded markets, armies, technologies and media” (Crehan, 2002). For researchers such as Clifford, cultural shifts reflect the power relations in play at a particular time and place.

Clifford’s work creates a critical shift in how I view the issue of identity in virtual environments. My own research to date has looked at how identity is created and affirmed; how the activities we are involved in and communities we associate with give meaning to any number of role-based identities that describe us at a given point in time (parent, teacher, employee, partner, etc.). When these identities exist in salience there is harmony, particularly when the identities we highly value are able to have prominence (Stets, 2005). But what happens when

there are identities that cannot be exercised because of cultural, legal or moral limitations that might make the behavior associated with that identity risky? Could these risky behaviors be the basis for what influences identity in a virtual space, where the participant can remain anonymous and exercise these behaviors relatively risk-free? What I wasn't considering (in so many words) was Clifford's view of power, and how power conflicts create shifts in culture. This aspect of power, who holds power, and how challenges to power are acted out, is the focus of my interest in Clifford's work.

The first part of this paper will briefly review my own research into identity and the seminal researchers who have influenced the direction of my work. This conversation will give way to looking at Clifford's work with indigenous populations, what happens as modernity is introduced into socio-historic culture, and how these conflicts parallel my own work in virtual spaces. Finally, the idea of power and how power is maintained, control is exercised, and what happens when people in a particular culture are forced to adapt, creating a culture that is more of a hybrid of old and new. To conclude, a research case study will be proposed that should act as a prototype for my own dissertation work in this area.

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“A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.”

- Anthony Giddens

The Role of Identity

Identity is a means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). Our earliest formation of identity includes gestures in a stimulus-response environment, leading to meaning making and the development of tools by which we interact with others. Mead (1934) described this as a “Process between organism and environment.” As we develop a language, activity plays an important role in how we interact within a community (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky asserted, “The most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously independent lines of development, converge.” Identity is a self-cognition based on the acceptance of a role that is either self-determined or assigned by others. These accepted roles determine behavior across a variety of situations (Stryker, 2007).

Interestingly enough, the development of identity is a dynamic process that is largely dependent on the feedback of others (Tafarodi & Swann, 1995). It would be no surprise to discover, we tend to gravitate toward people who affirm our self-identity, even if our self-identity is poor (Swann, Stein-Seroussi & Giesler, 1992). This is a significant point to make as

our conversation moves to culture and power, where the self-identity is influenced by our social identity as a member of a particular group.

The Role of Culture

What makes Clifford interesting as a critical theorist (and relevant to my own work) is his study of culture and how it is defined. In the past, I have struggled with the idea of culture versus environment, believing they were one in the same, and cumulative over time. Clifford's (1997) work has convinced me that culture is a place of transit – a snapshot of a moment in time, encompassing location, class, gender, race and “literariness,” suggesting that culture is always fluid and is very personal; we carry our culture with us. Our sense of cultural tradition is always being renegotiated as innovation and instability keep our sense of community in flux. Traditions are molded to the culture and left behind as something like a trail of breadcrumbs.

Clifford's (2004) work with indigenous Alaskan populations illustrates this idea of culture. The Alutiiq people had a disruptive history, from the arrival of Russians in the late eighteenth century to a WWII military presence and even the Exxon Valdez oil spill. In order to maintain their sense of a collective culture, the Alutiiq had to adapt to an environment that changed around them and challenged their very existence as a community. This was not only a political threat but an economic one as well. Each time the outside world encroached on their space, the Alutiiq were forced to abandon what they knew and relocate. Each relocation was accompanied by a shift in the power structure of the community. Ultimately, the modern world encompassed the Alutiiq, forcing a decision to either lose their culture entirely or embrace the challenges of modernity and create a business opportunity that taught newcomers to the area about the history and future of Alutiiq people.

Travel and Translation

The story of the Aluttiq isn't unique. Whenever a community has migrated, either by the interference of a political power (as in the case of Native Americans), or the need to secure a food source (tribes that moved to follow buffalo herds), communities have had to adapt and revise their culture (and ultimately re-write tradition) as their environment changed. Clifford (1997) gives a wonderful example of this in his account of the Moe (pronounced "Moay") family. This family was a group of Hawaiian musicians, performing slide guitar and vocal arrangements in the Hawaiian tradition. Of course, in Hawaii there were many musicians performing the same style of music, creating a competitive environment. The Moe family created a niche for themselves by performing their music outside of Hawaii, creating an awareness of Hawaiian music all over the world. Their international travels took them far away from their Hawaiian environment, challenging them to preserve their sense of Hawaiian culture over fifty-six years of perpetual transience. In a practical sense, the Moe family was a bounded cultural entity, encapsulated by traditional cultural values and process, while transitioning from one hierarchy to another as they went from country to country. Because these travels were necessary to their continued economic existence, their Hawaiian culture was in a constant state of translation in order to accommodate their environment. Ultimately, the aging of the family (and the power structure) caused them to return to Hawaii, where they have again transitioned to performing authentic indigenous music from the teens and twenties (creating a niche within their cultural home environment).

Hegemony and Power

Crehan (2002) suggests that hegemony is a domain of beliefs and ideas in the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes. Better stated, it is the *implied* acceptance of a

class structure, reflected in practical activity such as labor, economics, art, etc. Castronova (2005) calls this concept “institutions,” stating, “Human institutions are the rules of some game, rules that all players adhere to out of self-interest, and yet have a powerful structural influence on what they do.” In my own work in virtual worlds, the essence of role-play in synthetic environments assumes a class hegemony that distinguishes people who are “newbies” from those who have been in the space longer. In some reward-based games, an artifact (a golden sword, for example) might only be obtained after the player has reached a certain level of proficiency. This represents a class structure that is implied. The sword bearer might not have direct political or economic influence over a new player, but the very possession of the sword suggests a higher-class order. Bourdieu (1978) suggests this hegemony is even implicit in sport, where “brains” (higher classes) are separated from “brawn” (subaltern classes) by observing the preferred sporting activities of each class. Intelligent, well-bred upper classes approve sports (even as spectators) that are considered “mental” and “refined,” such as polo or golf. According to Bourdieu, subaltern classes are more drawn to exercises of physical confrontation (possibly reflecting their own inner struggles) such as football.

Clifford’s own work as a cultural anthropologist also describes this implied hegemony. In his interviews *On the Edges of Anthropology* (2003), he describes the role of the “White anthropologist” in the presence of indigenous people. The anthropologist is unwelcome but has an implied degree of safety, due to his power connections to the outside world. Natives know that if the anthropologist is harmed, their own people will suffer. As an act of rebellion, the natives might manipulate the anthropologist with stories that embellish the truth, skewing the researcher’s results.

Migration to Virtual Spaces

The work of Clifford and others have helped make sense of my questions about virtual identity, particularly with respect to what causes a person to choose one type of identity over another. After looking more closely at Clifford's work, I suspect the choice of a virtual identity might be the product of a voice (identity) that is subaltern, looking to emerge and participate within a community of like-minded members. Giddens (1991) talks about the emergence of communities that are boundary-absent by stating, "A pure relationship is one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver." He goes on to discuss that, "No one can 'opt-out' of the transformations brought about by modernity...the connecting of the local and global has been tied to a profound set of transmutations in the nature of day-to-day life." This concept is not new; there has always been a tension between what is tradition and what struggles to emerge. Clifford (2003) states, "Any community's ability to persist, to innovate, to change its own terms, is relative to its structural power." In a virtual space, community is constantly in a state of flux, as people bring their own cultural footprint in and out of the community at will. As this trans-world opportunity arises, and we hold our synthetic lives to be as important as our real lives, the value we place on the status and good we attain in our synthetic life will take on the same value as if they were real. Synthetic worlds are becoming a legitimate alternate life for millions of people, and that number is expected to increase. The distinction between real and synthetic worlds is beginning to fade and has begun to impact issues of power, policy and law, as well as commerce.

Research Methodology

Just as an ethnographic study attempts to document human behavior in a particular setting over time, the merging field of cyber-ethnography (Dickey, 2005) attempts to observe

human behavior in a virtual space. While this field of study is in its infancy and an existing body of research is emerging, those who are attempting to work in this space are similar to cyber cowboys in the Old West. Any number of research methodologies may be effective in this space and the proposed case study comparison is only one option.

Research Questions to be Answered

When I first considered what factors might influence virtual identity, it was from a position of curiosity; without a research base any presumptions would be based on speculation. Still, the three questions I had hoped to answer remained: (a) What causes people to choose particular identity traits in a virtual world, (b) how far removed are those traits from real life, and (c) How is the real life of a virtual world participant changed by their virtual identity and activities? This paper has outlined how my understanding of identity, and Clifford's work on culture, have created a basis of understanding for answering research questions one and two. What remains to be discovered is how the real life of an anonymous avatar is affected by their activities in a virtual world. As a result, my own research methodology and experimentation will be designed with question three in mind.

Case Study Design

Many research studies have been conducted in virtual spaces such as Second Life. In fact, I share my "digital" region (called a simulator or an island) with two other researchers, one of whom regularly conducts identity research within the space. This particular researcher (named Oshun in Second Life) uses a survey methodology, and interviews each avatar individually through text-based chat. Oshun uses an informed consent document that has passed the Human Subjects review for her university (Cornell); my hope is to produce something similar to what she is using. Part of her informed consent (which is delivered by note card to an avatar) states:

“Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. As has been already said in the descriptive information about this study, we are interested in learning about how people think about and manage the relationship between their real life and Second Life identities, and about their anonymity in Second Life. As already said in the descriptive material and in the Informed Consent Document, I will not be asking you to reveal anything about your real life. If you feel however, that any of my questions lead you to feel you will reveal too much of your RL identity please tell me so, and will move on to other questions.”

This objective statement is then followed by a series of ten questions, described more fully as part of Data Collection.

Data Collection

Oshun uses a series of questions that attempts to understand where a virtual world participant draws the line (if at all) between real life and virtual life. The questions are given in advance but are asked by Oshun (or one of her research assistants) during individual interviews with the participants. This is done to respect the anonymity of each participant, as well as to produce a text chat log of the interview. Some of the questions on Oshun’s survey would be similar to the types of questions I would ask:

- Do you create boundaries between your real and virtual lives?
- How do you decide what information about your real life to share?
- Has another resident ever found out your real life identity without your consent?
- Have you ever tried to find out the identity of another without their consent?

- Are there aspects of your virtual identity that you would not reveal to people in your real life?
- Are there things about your real life that have changed as a result of your participation in a virtual world?

Measurement

If there is an area that still seems vague in researching behavior in virtual spaces, it is in the area of measurement. As a result, I have avoided taking any classes related to qualitative or quantitative measures until now. There are those in the research community that feel studies without statistical supports are just not to be considered scientific or reliable. When I have spoken to Oshun about her own methodology, she has also voiced conflict over how to measure data and at this point is collecting data until she decides what methodology to use.

Now that I have come to a decision point in deciding whether to embrace a qualitative or quantitative focus in my work, I have realized my own interest is less in how *many people* have had their real life influence their virtual life (and vice versa), as I am in *why* these influences have taken place. This lends itself to a smaller, more in-depth study of fewer people as individual cases, chosen from survey results that might be given to a larger sample.

Interpretation of Findings

My hope is to use the survey data I collect to drill down on four individual cases that are willing to be studied in more depth. Because I am looking at how real life identity has influenced virtual identity, some information about the subject's real life will have to be known. Clifford's work in culture – its personal packaging, its ability to be transient, and its constant evolution – will be used as guidelines in how study data is interpreted. My goal is to produce a volume that

takes the reader on a specific journey of the lives of people who have chosen to make a synthetic world their second home, as opposed to statistical information about virtual worlds in general.

Conclusion

When I first entered the EDLI program, it was under the assumption I would study curriculum delivery methods, and how different learning styles might perform better with particular delivery methods. How boring. Something happened on the way to my dissertation: I met fire-breathing dragons, vampires, the trans-gendered, and many others who have made synthetic worlds their home and have created an identity there. Not only was I captured by the unlimited variations of how people transform themselves in virtual worlds, I was captured by *why* they chose one type of identity over another. As I have studied more about identity and how culture plays a role in how we view ourselves, it is apparent we carry our identity with us no matter where we reside. Clifford's work in culture, mobility, and evolution over time, does much to explain how easily we can transform ourselves into a digital world, still retaining those attributes that make us unique. The question that remains in my research is to determine how the virtual life of an individual influences their real life (if at all). To that end, this paper has become more of a roadmap documenting where I have been (identity and culture), now pointing toward a research proposal that attempts to discover a meaningful real life result to virtual participation.

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