

The Ontological Crisis of Melancholia: Searching for foundations in the ether of Cyberspace

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In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler interrogates the narratives that scar our bodies and shape our social possibilities. She argues that the power structures ordering individuals and states are predicated on a mourning that cannot be mourned; melancholia permeates these structures. Alerted to this melancholia or the self's ontological crisis, Butler reveals how the state affirms and reinforces the ontological crisis as part of her effort to draw attention to the need for an entirely new approach to resisting contemporary power structures. One approach, the one explored in this paper, examines whether Cyberspace might provide a space of resistance through which self-awareness of the paradoxical ontological foundations of the self can be found. Beginning with an explication of Butler's analysis of mourning and melancholia, focus is drawn to its political reification. Contrasted to this focus, the following questions concerning Cyberspace are investigated:

- Do Cyberspace's digital hybrids establish it as a place where we can realize our unacknowledged loss?
- Are psychosocial norms of embodied life being embedded into digital environments?
- While play can and does occur online, what are its limits, and how do these limits impact individuals who might become aware of their melancholic existence?
- Different camps suggest that digital environments are genuinely emancipative or repressive, this paper suggests a third alternative, a middle ground in which the self can use digital spaces to contingently work through ontological crises.

Twisted Subjectivity

What would happen if information caused a systematic disruption in the capacity to phrase language, to speak the world into being? Would such a viral recoding of our social DNA irreparably change us, leaving us unable to discursively realize what the social once was, or would there be some form of 'gene therapy' that could recuperate our normative conception of what the world is and can be?

To investigate these questions in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler traces the psychosocial lineage of power, searching for the constitutive elements of selfhood; she looks for a possible 'cure' that will let us recuperate the social. She examines the role of loss in the modern subject's constitution and finds that, at its root, this subject is captured by a longing and loss that it cannot recognize or fill. This experience of unidentified loss generates ontological crisis, whereby the subject cannot realize the foundation of its very Being. After alerting us to this crisis, Butler suggests that we must address the gendered power structures that guide individuals and states in their articulations of Being-in-the-world if we are to alter the logics of power that presently encapsulate the citizen. Butler works through the process of recuperation, which will lay the foundation for subsequent considerations of how Cyberspace's possibilities intersect with her project.

In Butler's analysis, the language of the social is one of a double disavowal. Subjects in Western societies are cast into gendered, heterosexual, social-normative narratives at birth. According to these dominant social narratives, Western subjects are forbidden to love a member of their own gender, which repudiates the possibility of loving or losing the love of a member of their own gender (Butler 1997: 138-9). This disavowal, the limiting of the subject's openness to love itself, transmutes homosexuality into a "never-never" relationship, where subjects can never love one of their own, and thus never lose the love of one most like themselves. This plight alienates them from the possibility of love that accepts gender and themselves, leaving them instead with a psychosocial hostility towards their own gender and their own physical constitution. Consequently, subjects experience a deep, though subconscious, loss. Heterosexuality's formative foreclosure of the possibilities presented to a subject's horizon – formative because from the moment of birth the 'never-never' relationship operates as a precondition for 'normal' expressions of subjectivity – causes subjects to realize themselves as "identit[ies] based on the refusal to avow an attachment and, hence, the refusal to grieve" (Butler 1997: 140). Accompanying this disavowal is an experience of guilt that is felt whenever a desire to love a member of the same gender occurs; modern subjects have been conditioned in such a way that they cannot desire what they desire, and any experience of this desire challenges the preconditions of the world's givenness to them. Such a challenge is associated with the guilt of violating society's unspoken rules, it constitutes a trespass against normative preconditions that orient one's very Being.

The self-abuse accompanying these feelings of guilt leads subjects to experience a 'knotted' subjectivity. They constantly seek answers to the questions "what and who am I," but as they approach the 'never-never,' or 'never love, never lose,' relationship at the core of their narrative structures, they repulse themselves from interrogating the relationship. They "cannot *remember* the lost object because she or he does not even know what she or he has lost" (Forster 2005: 138); the loss has been rendered opaque to consciousness itself. This crippling inability to identify one's own ontological foundation generates a crisis, whereby the subject cannot authentically ground their selfhood. The persistence of this loss and its formative effects become the primary structure of consciousness itself (Butler 1997: 142); loss is thus at the core of the social narratives that we are born into. In turning to the process of mourning, the absence manifest through melancholia can be clarified. Mourning occurs when we recognize that we have lost something and operates as a "psychic response to loss that reaches a definite end or conclusion" (Forster 2005: 134). When mourning, people can 'work through' their loss in a relatively transparent fashion. They create psychic artifacts that represent their loss by establishing symbolic representations that refer to what once was. This reference to past objects is more extensive than just forming a proxy to that which is lost; the psychic artifact incorporates the symbolic existence of the loss in its own

constitution as an independent object.¹ In the course of mourning, we experience a longing for the object that is signified by the symbolic representation of what was while recognizing that the loss cannot be reversed; when my grandmother dies I know she is lost to me forever. As subjects work through their loss, they accept the status of the psychic artifact as an autonomous marker that references what was; my memories of my grandmother are taken up and realized in the consciousness as the product of my consciousness. In contrast, when experiencing melancholia, the referent object is lost, which prevents the individual from 'working through' their loss. In the stead of psychic artifacts of the consciousness, melancholia leaves the subject in doubt of the essence of their Being because they lack a referent to what constitutes it. They are trapped in a paradox of desiring to know what they are, without knowing that knowledge of their ontological foundations would shatter their realized orientations of Being-in-the-world.

The pervasive affects of melancholia lead to a continuing process of self-aggression that involves subjects refusing to acknowledge their desire for closeness with members of their own gender. Rather than being open to the full range of intersubjective contacts that arise when loving another person, duty-laden associations become the core modes of intersubjective contact between members of the same gender. The nation-state's constitution commonly binds members of the state together, recognizing them as civic partners and private actors, rather than civic actors and private partners. While the constitution's principles are predicated on the maximization of individual freedoms and liberties, when substantively realized, they preclude 'deviant' forms of expressing one's freedom on the basis of these expressions of danger. Given that the constitution identifies citizens as authors and addressees of law, the same constitution implicates each person as responsible for the laws that violently limit their intersubjective possibilities; as citizens they legitimize the melancholia that constitutes their subjectivity.

Even when same-sex marriage laws *are* established the history of the constitution is not rearticulated, its core logics are left unquestioned; subjects are still perceived as its authors and addressees. What occurs is that the constitution is used to equalize rights by *dismissing* the inherent value of gender. This dismissal constitutes a defensive mechanism; members of the nation-state spin a new myth to prevent themselves from accidentally attending to the gender paradoxes operating at the root of their subjectivity. Thus, passing same-sex laws obfuscates the primordial effects of the double disavowal that citizens experience. The basis of subjectivity is not an issue that can be remedied by permitting exceptions to the law; what is needed is a critical appraisal of the 'normal', where the subjectivity that calls the nation-state into being is, itself, interrogated.

¹ Metaphorically, this can be represented in the capture of a moment in a photograph; the photograph possesses its own being as something that captures light on film, while also acting as a referent to the experience that has since passed by.

Butler acknowledges the state's complicity in continuing the melancholic existence of its citizens; politically, melancholia can be understood as "a rebellion that has been put down, crushed" by the state, a state that cultivates melancholia amongst citizens "precisely as a way of dissimulating and displacing its own ideal authority" (Butler 1997: 190-1). The state, as a construct of the subject-citizen, functions as a reification of the normative double disavowal that citizens commit themselves to. Further, the state recognizes homosexual relationships as instances of exceptionality, and uses these instances to codify the normal and abnormal. Melancholia, accompanied by an obfuscation of gender's role in the state's constitution, prevents modern subjects from perceiving the shroud hiding their paradoxical ontological foundation. Any attention to the paradoxical logics ordering normative understandings of Being would reconstitute the relations of power across the subject's entire range of hidden and available horizons and risk drawing attention to the exceptionality of the state itself.

Given the role of gender in constructing power relations and the deep ordering power of gender, Butler argues that citizens must liberate themselves, not from power but from their own melancholia (Butler 1997: 191). In questioning the ambiguities of gender that inaugurate the constitutive moments of the nation-state and the state's complicity in the inscription of social norms on the fabric of their social and material reality, citizens can recognize the ontological foundations that set the subject against itself. Only by realizing the perverse denial of the self's possibilities, which is constituted by gender functions at the modern subject's ontological foundations, and critically appropriating the nation-state's gendering norms can the actors of the nation-state, citizens, empower themselves. So empowered, they can refuse their role in constituting their own melancholia and refute the perverse normalizing logics of the state.

Given that citizens are thrust into a situation of unknowingly/unintentionally disempowering themselves at birth through the 'authoring' of law as future-citizens, the pre-citizen subject is captured by melancholia. The state, with its logic that citizens are the legal authors of their own laws, operates as the source and absence of power, insofar as it is the center of law that is predicated on undermining the potentiality of citizens as intersubjective beings. How, when thrown into the nation-state from birth, can citizens realize that they have been disempowered? How can they realize that the normative structures that orient their Being-in-the-world are actively directed towards maintaining the perversity of the modern subject's ontological foundation?

Perversity? Welcome to the Internet

With the birth of the Internet, we have seen the rise of popular multi-direction communications that can be synchronous or asynchronous, depending on the media channel used. Online, we are told that true anonymity is possible (Eckert and Pitcher 2001), and that our online actions are plastic, or malleable (Lessig 1997). In such an environment, can we explore possibilities that are otherwise foreclosed through the

narrative stream of the nation-state? Does a plastic realm of discursive and symbolic theatre offer a potential to reorient Being-in-the-world?

Cyberspace offers some potential for realizing otherwise foreclosed possibilities. The Internet's plasticity offers a certain playfulness through which individuals may enter otherwise 'unacceptable' relationships, which can provoke recognition of the ontological crisis. However, as much as Cyberspace might offer potential for reorienting ontological foundations, Cyberspace can also be considered a zone of normalization, which actually accentuates the foreclosure of possibilities.

A decade and a half ago, a scarcity of bandwidth meant that online communication between individuals was limited to text-based environments. The relative inaccessibility of widely searchable public information about individuals, combined with limitations to video and audio file transmission, enabled individuals to assume identities through textual assertion; a man could pretend to be a woman, a child an adult, an adult a child. Statements of identity were challenged on the basis of poor gender/age performances, rather than on visual or auditory discrepancies. According to Lawrence Lessig, during the textual era of the Internet, hardware (rather than software) architecture prevented graphics and sound from being easily shared online. Moreover, when the Internet was first available to the public, lawmakers were ignorant of the digital networks' possibilities, and commercial groups were unaware of how they might profit from it (Lessig 2006). Thus, Cyberspace was largely devoid of government regulations or corporate techniques for regulating (and profiting from) data exchange. Further, the norms governing the Internet reflected the libertarian attitudes of its academic and computer researcher creators, who envisioned this digital environment as open (any computer or network could join the universe of networks constituting 'the Internet'), minimalist (few computers needed to join the network for the Internet to function), and neutral (it did not discriminate bandwidth allocations depending on applications) (Goldsmith and Wu 2006: 23). These minimalist norms, combined with the lack of government or private awareness of the 'net's possibilities, established the Internet as a malleable space where creativity and innovation could flourish.

In the earliest text-based discursive environments, the possibility of playing another identity resembled entering a foreign, faceless space: the (discursively generated) body could be queered without fearing that weights of judgment would accompany such a performance in 'real', or physically embodied, space. The subject could perform gender identities that were not their own, adopt attitudes of intersubjectivity that diverged from those that they were expected to perform as physically embodied individuals, and they could mourn their inability to perform those 'cyber-identities' in physically embodied spaces. The deep desire to immerse oneself in alternate binary-enabled identities truly captured the eye of the media a few years later, in 1999.

In 1999, the performative possibilities and embodiment of the digital self were radically transformed by Everquest, the first mainstream graphical Massively

Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORG). In Everquest, players are thrust into the world of Norrath, a Tolkienesque world of swords, magic, goblins, heroism, and villainy. More than just a game, Everquest has spawned economic and social spheres that are microcosms of those in the physically embodied world (Castronova 2005). Individuals in MMORPGs can perform 'emotes' to visually emphasize textual and auditory expressions (players in Everquest can verbally communicate with one another using microphones) – now an individual's avatar can blow a kiss at another person's avatar when flirting, or thump their chest when bellowing their cries of grief. By cloaking oneself in a representative avatar, which moves through this virtual world, netizens can engage each other in a textual, visual, and auditory environment that is designed for millions of people to simultaneously interact in.

Accompanying these digital expressions of emotion are intense reactions to game events that carry over to the 'real' world. Heated conversations can erupt when players discuss 'lame' (i.e. distasteful) actions, remorse can accompany 'failure' to kill a particular monster, and rage can follow their avatar's defeat. Players have deep investments in their avatars and mourn losses that strike their digitally extended substance as they might grieve for losses in physically embodied space. The loss of a magical sword, which took tens of hours to acquire, creates a felt absence much as when a cherished CD is lost or destroyed in the non-digital world. If losing a digital artifact or having people betray you through the actions of avatars can cause a person to mourn, can the playfulness of acting another gender produce bond of love and a genuine sense of loss should that love be lost? More to the point, can digital environments operate as spaces where members of modern societies can express longing and love, grieve loss, and subsequently realize the double gender-based disavowal that grounds the modern subject's ontological crisis?

The possibility of online mourning suggests that the psychic potential for online transformation is (at least) similar to the potential of intense emotions to provoke moments of anxiety and questioning of ontological foundations in 'offline' environments. A core difference between digital and 'real' spaces is the relative ease of assuming an entirely alternate identity; the plasticity of the avatar enables individuals to engage in 'deviant' activities with few perceived repercussions. In terms of Butler's argument, this freedom suggests that individuals can take up homosexual fantasies and live them in safe, digitally mediated spaces. They can manifest love towards another person through their avatar and recognize the potential for meaningful same-sex relationships based on love, rather than on civic-grounded respect. The public civility that bonds similarly gendered individuals through their constitutional duties for and to one another is broken down in Cyberspace, insofar as these bonds identify physical bodies and their interrelations in territorial nation-states. In Cyberspace, the notion of the physical body, as well as the necessary civic relations between individuals, is problematized by ambiguity and the play of physicality and geolocation. This problematization, however, is only helpful for our investigation into the ontological crisis of the modern subject if it opens individuals to the possibilities of mourning love that is otherwise foreclosed. In line with our problematic, we ask whether a subject can develop a psychic artifact

of lost love, rather than losing consciousness of the loss itself. Effectively, does the ambiguity and consequent problematization of social norms enable individuals to recognize the ontological crisis that structures their way of Being-with the world?

It stands to reason that, through the process of recognizing the possibilities of love and the subsequent potential to lose the loved subject, that individuals could restructure their ontological foundation and respond to their crisis. In the course of doing so, they could take hold of themselves and actively realize and respond to the state's attempts to perpetuate subjects' melancholia. This argument, however, would not suggest that digital environments' plasticity is ontologically different from the possible experience that a person might have when engaging in a loving relationship offline. With this ambiguity in mind, let us turn to an alternative view that identifies digital spaces as conducive toward regulation to determine whether we should perceive digital spaces as zones of emancipation, or as those that subtly promote our ontological crisis.

Regulating Cyberspace

The Internet functions by transmitting small parcels of information (packets) at incredibly high speeds to servers that are located around the world. These packets, and the applications that generate them, follow a tightly regulated set of rules that are coded into the very possibilities of what a person can do online. These regulations carry over to other facets of the 'net; without a rigorously defined and complied with set of protocols consistent digital environments for individuals to enjoy could not exist. The regulation of the Internet, implied by the strict enforcement of protocols, suggests that interactive digital environments are pervasively encoded with the norms of the nation-state. This encoding, and the ability to regulate online actions through the use of computer code, severely limits Cyberspace's potential as a zone where individuals can realize potentialities that are foreclosed by melancholia.

While high-quality prepackaged sets of visual simulations are widely available at low costs on the Internet, there is little opportunity to manipulate their visage and make them one's own.² When turning to the 'reshaping' of digitally mediated identities, it is quickly apparent that the 'owners' of digital environments forbid modifying the presentation of an individual's digital self beyond strictly regulated logics. The MMORPG, World of Warcraft, has over 11 million people who are actively playing (Snow 2008).³ Accompanying these players on their treks into the world of Azeroth is a piece of software called the Warden system. Warden is designed to prevent individuals from 'cheating' in the game. Every 15 seconds or so, the Warden program runs code that captures all of the windows, programs, and operating

² As an example, while changing one's appearance is permitted in World of Warcraft, to do so cyber-goods must be purchased or collected. Things that are not explicitly coded into the digital space is forbidden from trespassing; the sanctity of Warcraft must be upheld, its purity from deviant norms maintained.

³ This means that more people play Warcraft than live in the state of Ohio!

system processes that are operating at the moment of the scan. The gathered information is transformed into the equivalent of digital fingerprints (hash codes) and compared against a list of 'banning hashes.' Should one of the collected fingerprints be matched to a known 'criminal fingerprint,' the player is removed from the game and unable to continue playing (Hoglund 2008; Eldridge 2008). The Warden system demonstrates just one facet of the regulation of digital activities in online environments.

While Warden hides in the background of the World of Warcraft regulating a person's actions on their computer while playing the game, regulations in virtual spaces are sometimes more transparent. When entering an online environment, participants typically must agree to an End User Licensing Agreement (EULA), which dictates the permissible ranges of action that consumers can take. These legal agreements limit the possibilities available to consumers⁴ and are accompanied by a complex set of social norms that have developed in most online virtual environments. The social environment in games such as World of Warcraft is dynamic and complex, and (arguably) as rich as the world that we physically embody (Castronova 2005), and these environment's social norms constrain the range of felt potentialities online, much as social norms limit the experienced ranges of possibilities in 'real' space.⁵ Accompanying social regulative structures are the actual architectures of the digital environments themselves; the code, protocols, and possibilities of these environments are designed and selected by the actual code writers (Lessig 2006). The process of choosing between permitted and prohibited actions (e.g. you can blow a kiss, but you can't bare your breasts or genitals in World of Warcraft) carries with it an associated set of social norms that often correspond with those found in the territorial nation-state in which the creators are located.

When the code or protocols that order and run the digital environments are disrupted (by injecting a virus or taking advantage of the protocols' and code's logic), the system quickly responds to resist and/or absorb the permutation of the structure (Galloway and Thacker 2008). Such permutations can include anything from more rigorous authentication systems, to programs like Warden, to sending messages to the players of the game that are meant to instill new social norms (often of peer-surveillance). This latter mode of altering digital environments is perhaps the most interesting, because it attempts to instill a set of norms that players are encouraged to adopt; this can be thought of in terms of public politics, where the judiciary or executive branches of government 'suggest' that citizens adopt new norms or processes in light of cases of exceptionality (e.g. "Be on the watch for terrorists!"). Behavior that is outside the suggested or permitted social norms can result in revocation of the privilege of entering the environment, lawsuits

⁴ The effectiveness of these legal shackles is of course a matter for debate (Lessig 2006: 124)

⁵ Of course, even in text-based games, such as Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) social norms developed. Current games, such as Warcraft and Everquest, are launched with particular expected social structures, whereas early digital environments had a greater plasticity in the constitution of their norms due to the relative youth of their environments (Mosco *The Digital Sublime*, 2005).

brought by other players for defamation, or even suits from the company if the infraction is serious enough.

Digging into this notion that norms from the 'real' world often carry into game design, usually in an effort to make the game more 'realistic', I would like to turn to MMORPG Ragnarok Online. Ragnarok is immensely popular in Asia, and several years ago it implemented features that made the environment feel 'real'. One of these features allowed avatars to marry one another. From the Ragnarok website, we learn:

You can arrange a beautiful wedding ceremony complete with a tuxedo and wedding dress. Make sure you promise never-ending love to each other before you plan your marriage.

(Unfortunately, same sex marriages are not allowed) (Ragnarok 2004)

After arranging for their avatars to marry, players are encouraged to "prepare marriage items such as a tuxedo, wedding dress, wedding veil and wedding bouquet." Players have already been reminded that the proper course for planning marriage is to state never-ending love and *then* marry; marriage is not to be followed by love but preempted by it. Following the ceremony, the married couple cannot battle creatures in the digital environment; during this time of peace, they are encouraged to replace combat with wedding festivities (Ragnarok 2004). The wedding rings that the avatars exchange are imbued with mystical qualities that allow the husband or wife to sacrifice their combat statistics for the benefit of the other, but they cannot be dropped, sold, or traded. In a progressive step, marriages in Ragnarok can be dissolved, though divorces carry a financial burden of 2.5 million Zeny (the currency of Ragnarok).⁶ The impoverished in Ragnarok are thus prevented from divorcing one another; estrangement is the 'best' they can hope for, but even estrangement does not release them from requiring to continually carry their wedding rings, which are 'coded' onto them until they divorce. In this sense, marriage in Ragnarok is more deeply coded than in physically embodied environments; at least you can throw away or sell a wedding band without a divorce in the 'real' world.

In these digital environments, where the social norms of the physically embodied world are imposed upon the digital avatars, are players being provided with a space that is any *more* playful than in the physically embodied realm? Admittedly, I cannot as rapidly assume the visage of a troll in physical environments (e.g. by applying a physical mask, costume, makeup, etc) as I can by logging into World of Warcraft and selecting a troll character, but this digital visage itself is of a different kind, rather than a different type, of mask that I can adopt in physical spaces. In deeply regulated online environments, the play of these spaces is found through subverting and exploiting the game's logics. Finding a bug in the game and exploiting it allows you

⁶ The market price for this much Zeny on December 2, 2008, in American dollars, is roughly \$2.50.

to perform truly exceptional activities; bugs facilitate play.⁷ In terms of gender, the logics of these digital spaces dictate what digitally mediated relationships players are explicitly permitted to engage in; finding the 'play' in these environments is explicitly forbidden.

This said, the explicit denotation of what gender relationships are and are not permitted can draw our attention to our inability to experience the loss of the a same-gendered love under the norms of the 'real' environment. The direct reference to the norms exhibited in nation-states reminds players that their possibilities are, in fact, limited both in this venue of Cyberspace, and perhaps in their nation-state as well. The clear notation made concerning the permissibility of same-sex marriages in Ragnarok suggests that this kind of sanctioned relationship is a relatively common game feature request. While it is certainly true that individuals can develop loving relationships in Ragnarok, as they could in text-based games of the early 90s, what is different in Ragnarok (and other contemporary digital spaces) is the extent to which dominant 'real-world' norms have pervaded the digital realm. Whereas in earlier iterations of online environments individuals' performances were incredibly plastic, now players must 'game' the system if they are to participate in 'unsanctioned' intersubjective relationships.

Managed Identities Online

One might want to respond at this point by saying, "the scenarios of regulated MMORPGs are outliers, and not genuinely representative of actions taken online. Anonymity is still alive and well, just not in spaces where you 'pay to play'." However, recent changes in identity systems threaten to severely debilitate the possibility of remaining anonymous online. With the attempted widespread abolition of anonymity in the name of social networking, advertising revenues, and user-friendliness, we must reconsider the plasticity of digital and/or digitized identities and their relationship to melancholia.

There is an ongoing drive to establish the 'social web', or an Internet that lets people that you identify as friends track and comment on the things that you do and say online. Businesses see social networks as a way to generate meta-content,⁸ which increase the value of original content by 'adding in' more information that is user-generated. This 'extra' information draws attention to the original article, and its surrounding advertisements, which increases the value of the article itself. The difficulty for business is enabling people to talk to each other while the business can collect useful *and* accurate information about discussants for subsequent marketing purposes. Presently, people evade the registration systems that businesses use to collect personal information for market by using 'junk' email accounts. Because of

⁷ Exploiting these bugs is a violation of most MMORPGs' terms of services that are agreed to when logging into the digital environments.

⁸ Meta-content is content about content. An example would be the comments that are associated with a particular news article, where the comments would be content about the contents of the article itself.

the relative anonymity that junk accounts provide, people can express elements of themselves that they would not were their identities fixed and/or located – they can be belligerent, outgoing, friendly, seductive, and so forth without worrying about their actions being traced back to their physical/‘respectable’ embodiment. In this sense, we would assert that the Internet provides spaces for individuals to perform elements of their identity without worrying that there will be repercussions for their performances.

This anonymity is being threatened. Facebook⁹ recently announced that they would launch a ‘connect’ service (which launched on December 4, 2008) to let Facebook users carry their Facebook identities with them as they access websites enrolled in the Connect program. Members of this program will let Facebook users leave comments and rate articles using their Facebook account information; in return for this ‘convenience,’ the Connect program member will retain a unique identity that can be correlated to the person’s Facebook information (Perez 2008). While various contenders aim to do similar things (Microsoft, Yahoo!, and other tech giants are also interested in managing people’s online identities for them) a managed identity system is (broadly) being recognized as important by the content giants of the digital world. These identity systems are ‘sold’ to users as enhancing their ability to move around online and interact with colleagues, all while simultaneously leaving a nearly perfect set of digital breadcrumbs that identify what they have done and where, which can be used to predict what they will do in the future. With a certified and reasonably cohesive online identity, employers, spouses, parents, teachers, and state authorities (to name a few) can learn more about a person’s normal and deviant performances than ever before (Perez 2008), effectively subjecting the playfulness of online activities to the scrutiny of the ‘real world’s’ normalizing gaze.

The mass-identity systems that are being proposed to govern the ‘social Internet’ seek to strip away the ambiguity and its associated playfulness even in areas where text-based discourse reigns supreme. Message boards, news websites, and so forth will call on individuals to have a cohesive, unified identity that is associated with a physically-embodied set of coordinates, which is subject to search functions. This movement will have the effect of orienting digital norms alongside those associated with the physically embodied spaces that individuals exist within. The norms of the ‘real world’ will colonize the previously ambiguous digital spaces by linking to social profiles that hold individuals’ names, ages, interests, and so on. This colonization, in turn, will limit individuals’ ability to engage in ‘taboo’ relationships online because of the concerns that any online activity will be identified by colleagues and peers – the social surveillance of embodied and digital peers acts as a gaze that imposes expected sets of norms on individuals and constrains their actions. With this caliber of near-total social surveillance, the play and plasticity of the ‘net is threatened; the

⁹ Facebook is a social networking service, where individuals contribute personal information to share with colleagues and friends. It is intended to facilitate the feeling of being close to people who are often great (geographical) distances away, as well as to generally share elements of your life with others.

uniform protocols and systems of the social web threaten to undermine the playfulness that once accompanied the 'net's relative ambiguity.

Having considered ways that social norms are imposed into online environments, let's return to our question to 'Do digital environments allow for individuals to recognize their ontological crisis, and if so, can they escape the double disavowal that has regulated their subjectivity since birth?'

Regulating Crisis

Digital environments dramatically changed between their inception and contemporary realization. This is, in part, a consequence of social learning, these environments' growing ubiquity, and awareness by governments and businesses. One of the most precious elements of digital embodiment, the ability to adopt a persona and perform facets of one's identity that would otherwise be kept a closely guarded secret, is being challenged by the increased drive to monetize and regulate digital environments. Even as these regulatory efforts continue, we cannot lose sight of individuals' desire and ability to 'game' the system. They can establish complex fake identities so their movements are more challenging to trace when they participate in the 'social web', and they can still move to less regulated digital environments. The more complicated process needed to retain online anonymity implies a certain awareness of what has been lost and an understanding of the possibilities that may have been foreclosed because of the norms taking root in Cyberspace.

In avatar-based environments, such as Everquest and World of Warcraft, the opportunities to adopt radically different personas are normalized by the regulations (technical, social, and legal) that enshroud the game's players. Similarly, games like Ragnarok Online suggest that the play of digital spaces is increasingly subject to content-owners' moral and ethical orientations. Such norms and pressures, however, are not new; they can be seen in the basic and substantive laws of nation-states and their efforts to enforce particular gendered notions of identity in service of perpetuating melancholia. What these digital environments offer, that physically located environments may not, is the possibility of encountering a wide range of actors that can provoke reconsiderations of the ontological foundations that our societies and personal relationships are built upon. Perhaps the digital environments' transformative potentialities come from the chance to encounter a range of social norms that would challenge the validity of norms that individuals adhere to. In questioning these structures, individuals can challenge the structures of power that constitute their subjectivity. In effect, digital environments can integrate an isolated town into a larger communications network that connects millions of people from different cultures, life experiences, and backgrounds.

Given this discussion, perhaps the communicative potential of the Internet, rather than the actual instantiation of self in a particular environment is what raises possibilities of consciously experiencing our ontological crisis. Through challenging the norms that govern our notions of the world's givenness, we might experience a

moment of anxiety, a period where the possibilities of the world's givenness (and how we understand the potentialities before us) are brought into question. What is most significant is that these experiences of anxiety are manifest by individuals who engage with digital environments, be whether text-based or avatar-based. Perhaps what is most interesting about digital spaces is the perceptions that people hold of them, believing that actions on the Internet are somehow anonymous or free of civil law. On the basis of these perceptions, individuals are willing to perform actions and engage in discourse that they would otherwise be hesitant to participate in, which would mute the potential for digital environments to provoke transformative changes in individual's perceptions of the world around them. The danger is that with increasing degrees of regulatory powers in digital environments and tighter associations between online actions and embodied being, individuals will be less willing to participate in potentially transformative actions and discourses in digital environments. Given that individuals make themselves open to others in the process of genuinely engaging with other cultures and ideas, there is a potential for a transformation of how they experience their potential horizons. Lest it be read that an unwillingness to expose oneself is a necessary consequence of online surveillance through programs such as Facebook Connect, the social web itself arguably extends individuals' vulnerabilities by making them more accountable to others, thus opening themselves to a greater range of potential avenues of intersubjective contact as a result of their (relative) transparency. The worry is that rather than embrace the vulnerabilities associated with this accountability, individuals instead retreat from discourse, fearing the challenges that might emerge as they communicate with others in Cyberspace.

What cannot be forgotten is that even when we consider Cyberspace through the lens of discourse, privileging it without accounting for Cyberspace's regulative norms is dangerous. These norms shape the range of permissible, and possible, discourse and actions, and suggest that options available to individuals in Cyberspace (may?) dominantly operate within the constraints of the nation-state's regulatory norms. The 'social web' and the need for members of digital environments to survey and police one another lends credence to worries that digital environments are being colonized by territorial norms, and suggest that Cyberspace may just be a space to rearticulate traditional logics in a digital medium. Given that Butler's analysis notes that a reorientation of subjects' ontological foundations will empower subjects to escape from the state's injurious logics, we must ask whether digital environments genuinely offer a place for discourse, action, and the realization of unconscious losses, or whether it operates as another element of the state's (and, unconsciously, the subject's) attempts to maintain dominant power structures. The nation-state's logics are not necessarily avoided, or hidden from, when entering Cyberspace, and the ontological crisis that operates as the modern subject's ontological foundation is not *necessarily* resolved in this space. What Cyberspace *does* offer is another avenue, another chance, to realize the state's paradoxical logics by facilitating intersubjective contacts in a space that can provoke anxiety, mourning, and loss.

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