

STUDENT
DTC 475
5 March 2010

Transformative Cyberspace

Although the issue concerning the effects of cyberspace and online communities on real life can be approached from a variety of positions, identity and proximity are the most pertinent factors transported from the virtual world of cyberspace into the real world. Neither cyberspace nor the real world are zones where individual or group differences become invisible or melt away, but cyberspace and online communities help mitigate some of those differences, which allows individuals and groups to find commonalities that may go unnoticed if dealing purely in the real world. However, within the relative filtered safety of cyberspace these lessons can ultimately transform interpersonal interactions offline.

As noted above, many of the same differences that exist in the real world, for better or worse, are transported to cyberspace when people go online. This is achieved through word use, group selection, volunteered information, avatar selection, etc. However, thanks to the filters of the technology and text, the presence of these factors is not immediately obvious. The softening of this real world barrier may facilitate greater interaction with a wider group of people if people do not approach each other with a set of preconceptions. These ideas of preconceptions and identity are made apparent in the example of Alllookslike.com presented by Nakamura in *Digitizing Race*. Nakamura explains this softening noted above when she states, "[Alllookslike.com's] overt content is about Asian American identity [and] creates a discursive space that is ... hospitable to honesty and openness" (81). Nakamura provides further explanation that "[each] user is forced to confront her inadequacy in the face of visual 'evidence' of race" (81). While Nakamura applies this example specifically to an Asian or Asian American

audience, the alllooksamer.com nationality quiz could be adapted to any broad racial group and can just as easily be applied to those who inhabit cyberspace. In the alllooksamer.com example, people are presented with a representation of something and then required to fit that representation within a set of real world notions or biases. However, when that representation doesn't mesh with the idea, a transformation, even if slight, in thought about what defines a person can take place. In cyberspace this doesn't have to happen in the form of a test, but can happen after interacting with an obscured other and learning conception breaking information about them. This can happen in real life, but due to issues such as geography and social pressures in real life, cyberspace is a much more likely and safer arena. The breakdown of these mental barriers can lead to interactions that expose common threads between disparate identities.

It is possible to expand on the discussion of alllooksamer.com and issues of identity and commonality. Within the context of cyberspace, we not only have the opportunity to learn interesting, and sometimes shocking, information about people through continued interaction, but we can also discover common links by considering how individuals represent themselves online. This has much less to do with obvious interests and hobbies written in profiles, but more to do with avatars, like AIM buddy icons mentioned in *Digitizing Race*. As previously noted, this is closely related to the discussion about alllooksamer.com, but it is slightly more simplistic yet deeper at the same time. In the scenario and example noted in the paragraph above, there is a slow realization that certain ideas no longer apply. However, when considering Nakamura's example of AIM buddy icons, there is an opportunity for a much more immediate of similarity within the other. Nakamura makes note of the complexities in defining one's self in a common template and limited animation (58). These limitations reflect some of the filters of cyberspace and while they seem limiting, they actually open more space for discussion and obvious ways to

find connections. Nakamura states "They work to create intersectional identities in terms of race, religion, gender, and politics. They are all build using the same 'doll' template" (58). By removing or minimizing some of the more superficial aspects of the avatar, users are free to create less granular representations of themselves while at the same time retain focus on what is important. Although this could bias someone against another, it also affords the chance to meet another person and identify shared interests or values that may have otherwise remained ignored.

Through providing ways to recognize faults in mental constructs about people and expose commonalities, cyberspace narrows the mental, conceptual, or emotional gaps between people. An individual may find that they fit in with friends and family in their default real community, but are still somewhat removed from that community due to other less apparent issues. By exploring cyberspace and having encounters with people who are geographically distant, but conceptually close, an inhabitant of cyberspace may find a new social outlet or that they can apply the same process of discovery to reduce the conceptual gap in the real world or seek out like minded people in the real world who can become part of their real world community. Although it has been said that cyberspace and the Internet have transformed expectations and interactions between people in the real world, this isn't a negative thing; it's just an example of cyberspace shaping the real world.

Works Cited

Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008. Print.