

Textbased VR — Scenarios for Virtual Communities

Oliver Frommel

Workshop

In contrast to the widespread use of the World Wide Web, more complex, text-based Internet services — such as IRC and MOOs, the subjects of workshops at the Ars Electronica Festival — have lead rather a shadowy existence. Not only have some of these been in operation considerably longer than other services, but they also offer users who have gotten familiar with them an interesting spectrum of possibilities — due in no small measure to the strongly expanded communications tools they make available, which can be applied to inter-user communication and not just to query individual data banks. Access to these services is a bit difficult, obviously as a result of their text-based nature. These workshops offer the chance to get started in text-based VR and to become familiar with certain aspects of these services, which I would like to briefly summarize here.

The development of systems for text-based virtual realities (CMCS = Computer Mediated Communication Systems) such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat) or MOOs (MOO = MUD Object Oriented; MUD = Multi User Dungeon) proceeded hand in hand with the creation of the technical preconditions for multi-user operation of processors also on a worldwide scale.

The shift from central, monolithic computer systems to individual computers over the course of this process and the construction of global data networks led to the development of today's text-based VR systems and the communities which "populate" them. The first MUD was operational in the early 1970s, thematically oriented toward fantasy role-playing but already including what was then termed ARPANET, the forerunner of Internet. Later, with the origination of LambdaMOO at Xerox PARC, users were offered not only the possibility of expanding their world to include the creation of objects as well as actions but also of taking the first step in the transition from a rather playful fantasy world to a "Social MOO". The thinking behind it was the creation of a system and a space for a virtual community.

IRC, on the other hand, was set up without an agenda with respect to content as an efficient tool for communication in Internet. A key difference to its forerunners such as "talk" or "write" was that in IRC only a dialogue was possible, while in "talk" or "write," the concept of "channels" enabled group communication.

The reduction of interpersonal communication to the exchange of a written text — initially perceived from a superficial perspective as a restrictive feature — demanded, as a common basis for virtual reality, the reciprocal development of new sociocultural gestures and codes which, quite naturally, might completely lose their significance outside this (virtual) world. Precisely in this way, similarities exist between modes of behavior in the physical — usually perceived as the real — world and those in a text-based reality, due to the far greater personal experience most individuals usually have in the physical world. The attempt is being made to transpose proven mechanisms into virtuality. To some extent, however, these mechanisms take on a completely new significance in their new context.

This reorganization of received forms of social interaction and communication is, in each individual case, an extremely personal process which — compared to the physical world — lacks extensive precedents. Language, which has now become the medium of the complete range of social interaction, takes on an additional level of significance in contrast to conventional applications: it offers more latitude for (mis)interpretation. The available means

of communication, even for physicality and the expression of feelings, consists of nothing more and nothing less than words.

Text thus assumes a pre-eminent position in the formation of a community of virtual reality; however, the culture of this reality or community is also shaped in exactly the same way by its purely technical possibilities — the actual tools and systems employed to enter and process texts. These technical possibilities and limitations significantly influence — occasionally on a totally banal level, such as repetitions, quotations or the seemingly intentional failure of the attempt to communicate a private message — the development of this virtual community.

Another interesting question is that of the interconnections between physical reality and its corresponding virtual existence. Here, the greatest potential may well lie in allowing an individual's own "reality" to exert as little constriction as possible and to enable precisely these boundaries to be overstepped in virtuality. A classic example frequently cited in this context is the phenomenon of gender swapping.

A problematic aspect which arises in this and other forms of [role]playing is that of truth or authenticity on both sides of the communicational process.

Workshop <http://www.aec.at/tVR/>