







# On Being a Cyborg: Identity Work in a Posthuman Era

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# Cyborg: Cybernetic Organism

- Original meaning: intervention that biologically alter human being; human-machine hybrid
- Contemporary meaning: informational-material assemblage; sociomaterial entanglement
  - Splicing human will, desire and perception into a distributed system of cognition that combines enacted ('real') bodies and represented (virtual) bodies
  - Extension of body's senses with technology: multiple embodiments





# “We are all Cyborgs Now”

- “The Internet to us is not something external to reality but a part of it: an invisible yet constantly present layer intertwined with the physical environment. We do not use the Internet, we live on the Internet and along it. there was a natural Internet aspect to every single experience that has shaped us. We made friends and enemies online, we prepared cribs for tests online, we planned parties and studying sessions online, we fell in love and broke up online.”

○ “We, the web kids” manifesto by Piotr Czerski, YouTube



# Posthuman Era

## Liberal Human Subject

- Possessive individualism
- Agency, desire and will belonging to self and distinct from will of others
- Consciousness central to being human
- Body as warrant of personhood

## Posthuman Subject

- Collection of heterogeneous material and informational components
- Distributed cognition
- Boundaries continuously (re)constructed
- Dis- and re-embodiment

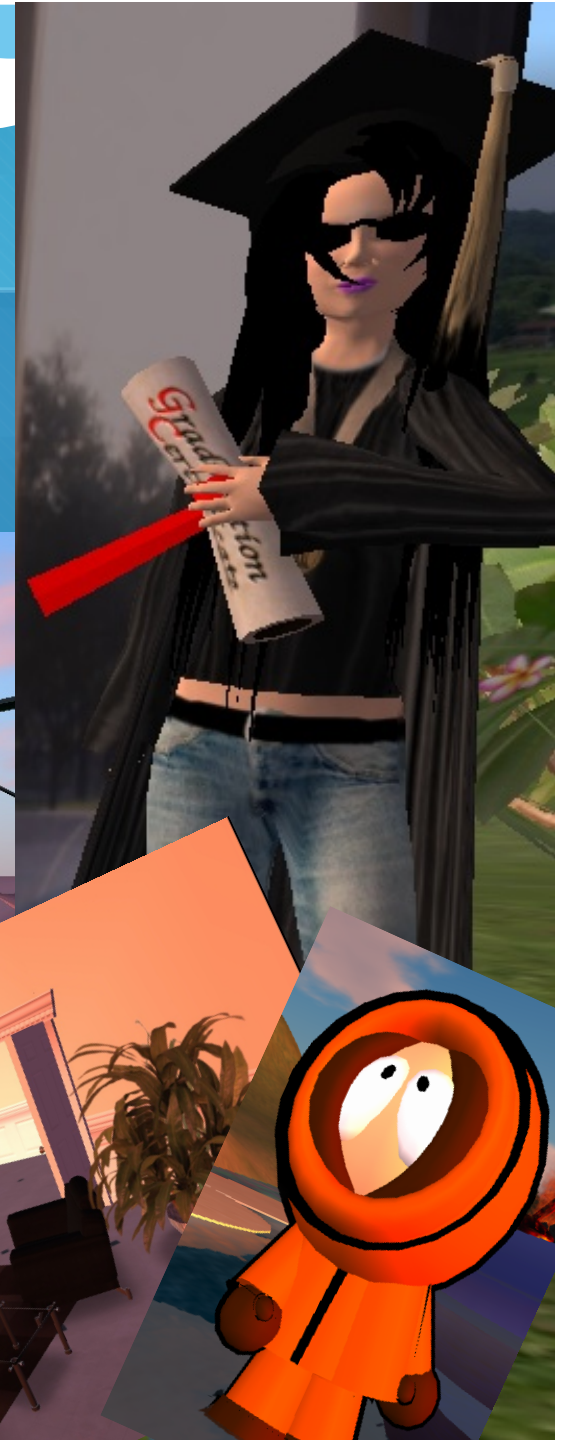
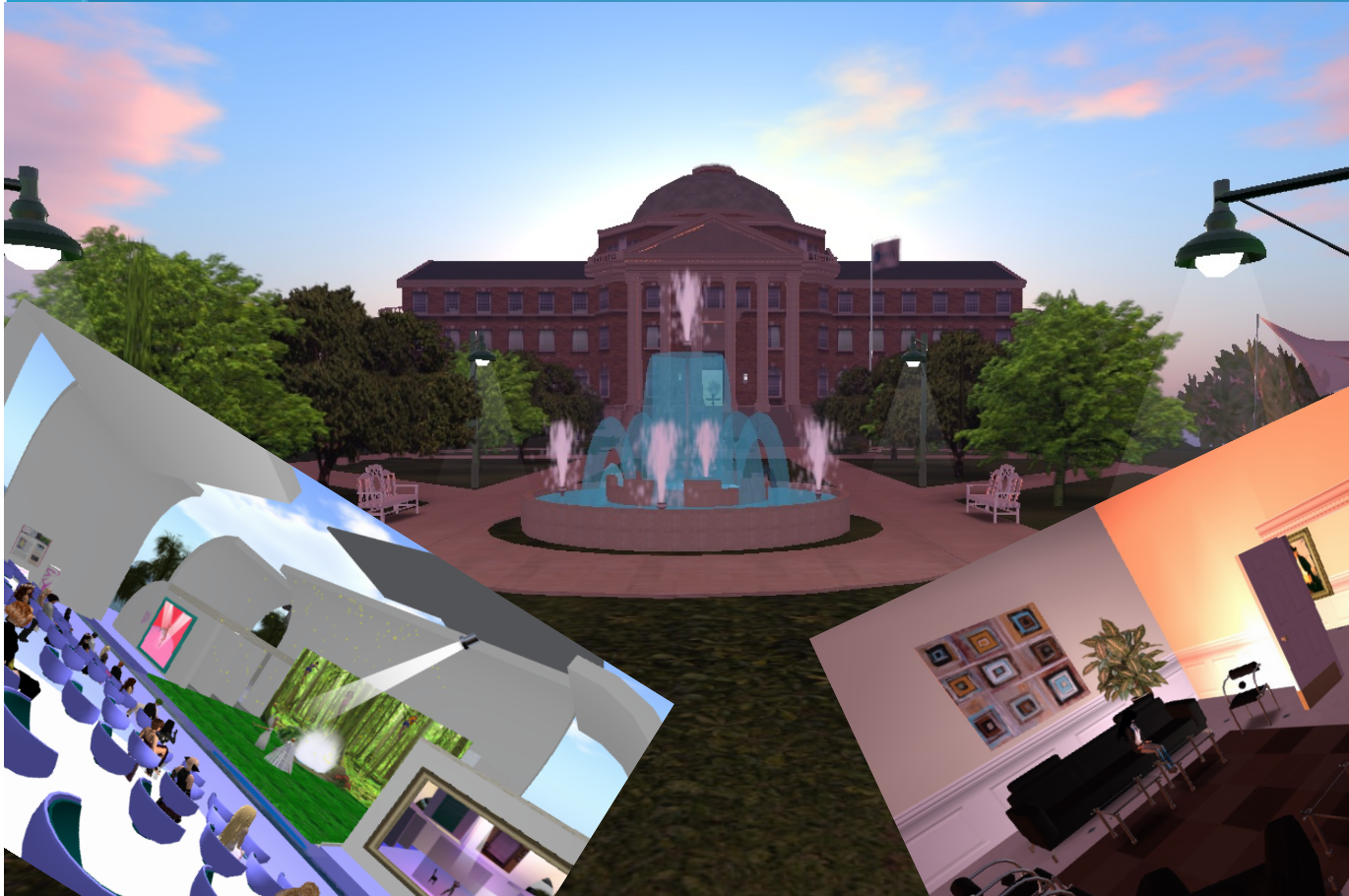




# Posthuman Era: Key Assumptions

- Privileges information patterns (order/randomness) over material instantiations (absence/presence)
- Distributed Cognition: consciousness not seat of human identity, but only part of it
- Human body is original prosthesis that can be extended or placed alongside other embodiments
- Human being can be articulated with intelligent machines; so, no essential difference between bodily existence and computer simulation

# Second Life







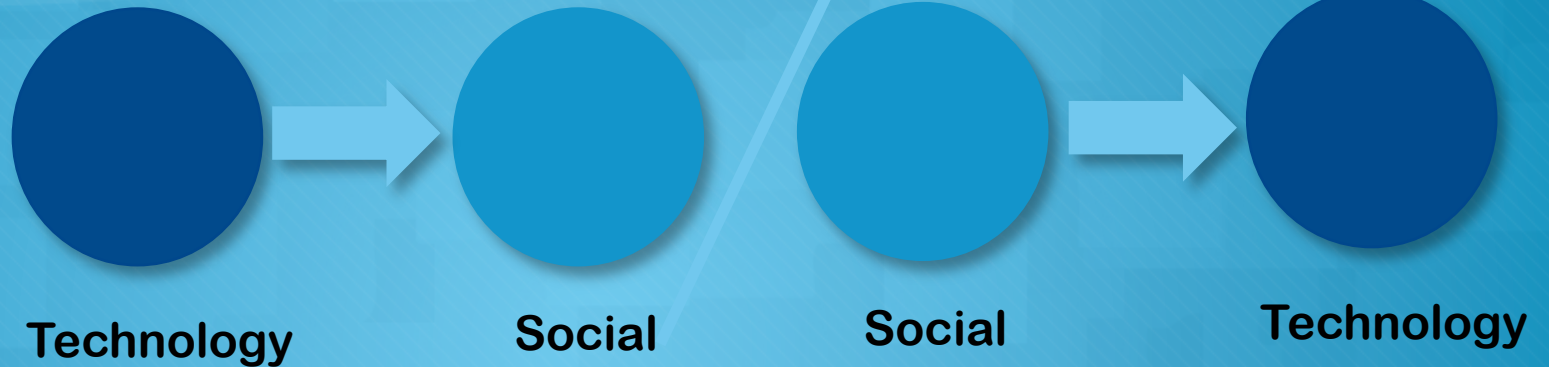
# Cyborgian Identity Performance: Key Concepts

- Agential Cuts
  - Sociomaterial entanglements situationally separated by discursive and material practices
  - Understand when/where, how and why cuts are made
- Performative – vs representational – identity
  - Being performed: performance as citation of discourse
  - Productive: performance produces (rather than represents) identity

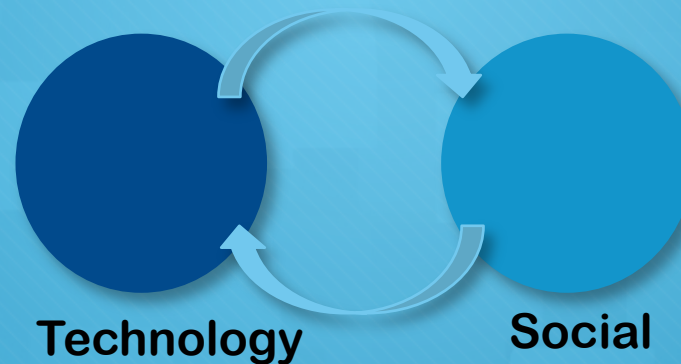


# Sociomateriality & Agential Cuts

Discrete  
Entities



Mutually  
Dependent  
Ensemble



Sociomaterial  
Assemblage





# Identity Performance

## Representational

- Self that pre-exists performance (doer behind the deed)
- Identity as source of performance; stable resource with fixed properties
- Impression management by working *on* avatar

## Performative

- Subject that is produced through material-discursive practices
- Identity as effect of performance; relational phenomenon with situationally enacted properties
- Identity enactment by working *through* avatar





# When/Where Cuts are Made

- Discourse

- pervasive systems of thought (including ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices) that enable and constrain what can be thought, said and done

# Domains of Use

## Emergent Relational Structure

### SIMULATION

- SL as stand-alone economy; virtual world as substitute for 'real'
- Connection to referent is temporarily suspended and strategically re-enforced

### FREE PLAY

- SL as escape from 'real' life; perfect alternate reality
- Alterity relationship to 'real'
- Espoused separation b/w actual and virtual to maintain perfection

### VIRTUALIZATION

- Digitalizing the actual world; SL used to solve RL problems
- SL as extension and enhancement of the 'real'
- Continuity and congruence b/w SL and RL

### ROLE PLAY

- Enactment of fantast world based on community norms, rules and narratives
- Separation b/w actual and fantasy world is managed via group norms

Professional

Social

## Defined Relational Structure



# Discourses

## Emergent Relational Structure

### MARKET

- SL residents divided into consumers and producers
- Identity goal: become coveted brand that makes 'real' money
- Cut: enough RL info to perform personhood

### FREEDOM

- Experiment with ways of being, experiences and relationships unavailable in actual reality
- Identity goal: explore possible selves; uncover 'true' self
- Cut: RL emotions for authenticity

### AUGMENTED REALITY

- Improving actual world by extending it into virtual
- Identity goal: become cyborg; develop skills in SL that count in RL
- Cut: draw SL competences into RL

### CLAN

- Express creativity within the confines of the fantasy community
- Identity goal: play coherent character that levels to highest position in clan hierarchy
- Cut: draw on personal knowledge to perform coherent character

Professional

Social

## Defined Relational Structure



# How Cuts are Made

- ◊ Boundaries that are enacted:
  - ◊ Identity: Avatar vs self
  - ◊ Agency: Technology vs human actor
  - ◊ World: Virtual vs actual reality
- ◊ Practices of Cutting
  - ◊ Discursive
  - ◊ Material





# Discursive Cutting Practices

- Communicating in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person: emote writing (e.g., “Mantis Avalon laughs at your joke”)
- Talking about avatar in 3<sup>rd</sup> person
  - Attributing emotions, desire and will to avatar; avatar emotions associated more with mind (“content”) rather than body (“tired”, “under the weather”)
- SL prefix: SLove, SLex, SLives
- Selectively turning info flow from RL to SL on/off
  - Limiting communication about RL issues
  - Contextualizing SL actions with info about RL identity; e.g., king is an IT consultant in RL



# Material Cutting Practices

- Distinguishing between physical and digital embodiment
  - Watching avatar perform scripted practices of the body (e.g., dancing, building) constructs avatar agency
  - Not using voice
- Alternative virtual embodiments (i.e., alts separate from main avatar)
- Doing SL in public spaces (e.g., family room)





# Why Cuts are Made

- ◊ Dialectics

- ◊ Unity of Opposites (duality): Oppositional logic where contradictory poles are mutually constitutive (interdependent)
- ◊ Opposing/conflicting forces cause constant motion and change
- ◊ Change is evolutionary; spiral rather than circular pattern

- ◊ Semiotic square

- ◊ Multiple metaphoric schemas



NOT REAL

REAL

VW is CONTAINER

Surface

Seek sense of self by  
uncovering emotions, desires  
and will (self-reflection)

Deep

Too self-involved

Too socially constrained;  
Loss of self/uniqueness

VW is RELATIONS

Separate

Seek sense of self by  
connecting with others  
(social interaction)

Together



NOT REAL

REAL

VW is CONTAINER

Surface

Deep

- ① Role play submissive
- ⑤ Avatar kneeling poses

- ② Recognizes deep desire to marry & be taken care of
- ⑥ Recognizes pride; holding grudges

VW is RELATIONS

Separate

Together

- ③ Selfish to engage in relationship for self-learning
- ⑦
- ④ Supportive partner which entails RL issues and dominant behavior



# Social Media Research: Operationalizing Sociomateriality

- Performativity & Discourse
  - Material & discursive practices produce – rather than represent – identity
- Agential Cuts
  - Material and discursive practices of boundary drawing in sociomaterial entanglement
- Dialectics
  - Inherent contradiction between sociality and narcissism, physical and virtual embodiment, ...