Cultural Presence

Erik M. Champion
University of Melbourne, Australia

INTRODUCTION

In many text-based virtual communities, confusion exists between the notion of social presence and cultural presence. While social presence may be evident in these communities, cultural presence may require more than dialogue or persistent world data (that is, backed up by off-line databases and retrievable after by online sessions).

It is also not clear how much cultural presence is available in three-dimensional online games and role-playing environments. While they may have a great deal of social presence, these environments typically provide for instrumental learning that develops understanding of the design rules of the virtual environment, not the embedded and embodied social rules and individual beliefs of the participants as a community.

In the case of virtual history and heritage environments, it appears that we do not understand cultural information and how to provide for it or communicate it digitally. Virtual heritage environments are a good example of this lack of meaningful interaction (Mosaker, 2000; Schroeder, 1996, p. 115). Apart from such isolated examples as Blaxxun's The Renaissance project or VRoma ("A virtual community for teaching and learning classics"), one may well wonder whether these environments are communities at all.

People intending to travel to a heritage site may have different requirements to people just exploring a virtual world. People may want to use virtual technology in different ways: to use the information as a travel guide; to imagine, explore, or understand the past; or to meet and socially participate with other people. Virtual environments that would be helped by a sense of cultural presence could be virtual communities, language and social exchange sites, virtual travel and tourism sites, or virtual heritage sites.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 357)

Jenks (1993) argues that most definitions of culture emphasize the use of knowledge as organized and represented by symbols. He notes one reason for the confusion is that it is often used to separate, as between humanity and nature or between humanity and machine, and also to unify, culture as that which humans have and animals do not. Historically culture may be a level of perfection (a person of culture), a stage of social development (a society with a developed culture), the collective works of art and intellect (the cultural output of a society), or the way of life of a people (cultural traditions and perspectives of societies). Anderson (1999) agrees that culture is often seen to refer to non-Western people or to an elite, as in "high culture."

By contrast to culture as an organization of knowledge via symbolic representation, culture is rules based according to Bourdieu (1984). For Crang (1998), culture is "sets of beliefs or values that give meaning to ways of life and produce (and are reproduced through) material and symbolic forms." Crang extends Sauer's early writings and remarks that landscape is a "palimpsest"; culture is embedded in space (material objects) and reconfigures itself over time.

These definitions do share similar features. Culture is in some way socially created, defined, and managed; culture is expressed via language and artifacts; and culture is vaguely bounded and open to (mis)interpretation. For example, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976) wrote that language is intersubjective, exemplified by how children learn. They learn by seeing how others respond to them: learning is a totally interactive process, and it is language itself that constitutes our life-world.

Culture is thus impossible to clearly demarcate. Cultural geography is interested in "difference" and "coherence" ("the ideas that hold them together," [Crang, 1998]). Culture is thus a connection and rejection of threads over space and time. How cultures are spread over space and how cultures make sense of space is thus interdependent. A visitor perceives space as place, place "perpetuates culture" (frames it, embeds it, erodes it) and thus influences the inhabitant (Tuan, 1992, p. 44).

HOW CULTURE IS LEARNED

When we visit other cultures we often learn cultural perspectives through copying others' behavior, through listening (to their language, myths, and music), or through reading text and viewing media (as tourists and students). When we visit cultural heritage sites as social scientists we also develop pictures of the past inhabitants. This is done through deducing patterns of behavior from artifacts, knowledge of other comparative cultures, and changes to the landscape (anthropologists and archaeologists).

We learn about a culture through dynamically participating in the interactions between its cultural setting (place), artifacts (and how they are used), and people teaching you a social background and how to behave (through dialogue devices such as stories and commands) along with your own personal motives.

Hence, one can gain an idea of a culture indirectly through artifacts (Schiffer & Miller, 1999). However, we typically learn of culture socially, through other people telling us how to behave or advising us when what we have done is not in accordance with social beliefs. So there are two major ways of transmitting culture: through other social agents (through the language actions and reactions of other people) and through artifacts (the objects created and modified by people).

CULTURE IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

[A]ll *people live in cultural worlds that are made and remade through their everyday activities*. (Agnew, 1993, p. 90)

A cultural place via cultural characteristics identifies its inhabitants. We can digitally recreate a built form, but how do we recreate a web or system of behavior? The only behavior system online is via forums and chat rooms, and apart from dialogue, interaction is very limited (Schroeder, 2002).

It is true that the more successful online communities such as MUDS seem to have a strong sense of social presence (Towell & Towell, 1997). For example, the Well had a word limit, and people had to type in their real names, but they could also add pseudonyms that reflected how they felt or wanted to be perceived that day. Divided into interest groups, the Well also allowed people to focus their collective energies on exploring new ideas together, even though the interface was only simplistic text entry, and strong individual opinions could actually forge community identity through conflict and acrimonious debate (Hafner, 1997; Rheingold, 1993).

Merely experiencing social presence is ephemeral and fleeting, and does not layer the environment with a felt "history." Hence Talbot (1995) is right to argue that Rheingold's notion of "accidental history" and placeless electronically distributed minds work against community, not for it.

And while years of text-based chat interaction can be considered a history, it is not an embodied history. Culture is more the material embodiment of social agency than the direct textual citations of individuals; it has a sense of permanence that attempts to outlive its immediate originators.

Perhaps textual communities can build an idea of social presence, but it can only be sustained if the users have an idea of whom they are talking to and what they (over time) consistently believe in. Bruckman further suggests a community has the ability to share and discuss in order to create meaningful activity and in order to learn (Berman & Bruckman, 2000; Bruckman, 2004). De Souza and Preece (2004) suggest that communities also require adherence to norms and rules. This, however, is not cultural presence.

People in a chat room may be experiencing social presence, without feeling that they are experiencing a strong sense or level of cultural presence. Hence an online community with a strong feeling of social presence (that there are other people online) does not mean that there is a strong feeling of cultural presence (where the dreams and endeavors of the community's participants are evident in the design and experience of that community).

One might well ask if 3D chat rooms add any significant filters or cues to a system of behavior. Johnson (1997) notes the Palace is 3D but might as well be 2D. There has been little online reconstruction of heritage sites with the social traditions that make them meaningful. For example, we have data, multimedia applications, and three-dimensional models, but no cultural "place" in terms of identifiers as to how to behave in another culture. To gain a full sense of cultural presence we also need to experience culture itself as a process rather than as a product.

For example, in online communities we are still making cultural inferences about people, but generally through text alone (perhaps with the help of emoticons, graphical icons that represent various emotions). In online worlds where we can build objects, generally there is not enough personalized interaction to deduce cultural notions about the creators. The world-building tools are typically designed to be used by anyone and for a functional rather than socially identifiable purpose.

Yet games, arguably the most successful virtual environments, also add tasks, goals, user personifica-