

Chapter XXVII

New Media and the Virtual Workplace

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ABSTRACT

There are few terms in the past decade that have excited the popular imagination more than “New Media,” even though few self-described “New Media” scholars agree about precisely what it means or what makes it so new. Nonetheless, New Media has valuable lessons for modern business. The purpose of this chapter is to explore some various definitions of the term “New Media,” unlock the key concepts, and discuss how these theories and practices can facilitate professional communication in new virtual workplaces (with a particular focus on 3-D virtual environments). The goal of this chapter is to show how New Media conversations about Play, Space, Identity, Simulation, and Collaboration can help foster more effective virtual workplaces. While there is no magical template for building productive virtual workplaces, this chapter will help readers understand and apply some of the principles of New Media to better understand the obstacles and affordances they offer modern business.

INTRODUCTION

Although the term “new media” is commonly heard in both academic and professional settings, it is not easy to define. Indeed, it may not be possible to offer a definition that any two New Media theorists will accept without substantial qualification. Janet Murray (2003, p. 3) claims that the term “is a sign of our current confusion,” and Lev Manovich (2003) acknowledges that it is “not so easy to answer” people who ask him for a definition (p. 15). Perhaps we should not be surprised. Indeed, some wits might quip that

if we could agree on a set of stable criteria to identify and evaluate New Media, we would no longer be talking about something “new.” What Fredric Jameson (1991) writes of Postmodernism might well be said for New Media: “The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the beginning, of our discussion of it” (p. xxii).

However, rather than dismiss the difficulty of defining “new media” as mere quibbling or inane pedantry, we would do better to accept it as an inevitable (and desirable!) consequence of life in a field so wonderfully fertile and fresh. New Media theorists and artists challenge so many of

our oldest and venerated conventions, challenging us always to ponder the unexpected and celebrate the ambiguous. Like its older sibling Postmodernism, New Media is often understood not just as self-conscious and self-reflexive, but self-ironic. If New Media ever takes itself seriously, it is precisely to demonstrate its own playfulness. Finally, New Media theory can help us better understand the phenomenon of the virtual workplace.

One of the central tenets of New Media is the concept of *play*, first elaborated by Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens*. *Play* can be understood in the sense of *playing* a game, *play-acting*, or the *play* of a loose steering wheel. Like so many other aspects of New Media, *play* is flexible and mutable. Surely, videogames are meant to be *played*, but by the same token (or quarter, as it were) these devices allow us to *play* a role and are often said to be *playing* us. Indeed, one of the “holy grails” of computer science is the achievement of truly convincing artificial intelligence, which, among other applications, may one day be sophisticated enough to prevent a human player from distinguishing between human and computer-controlled characters in a virtual environment (the “Turing Test”). Although some of us would probably like to imagine an unbridgeable gap between human and computer intelligence, New Media encourages us to *play* with this “binary” opposition. Rather than view the situation in terms of “us and them,” New Media theorists might prefer the metaphor of the *cyborg*, a concept explored by Donna Haraway in her essay “The Cyborg Manifesto.”

Another important New Media concept is *Space*, a category that plays an obvious and critical role in three-dimensional virtual environments. Borrowing from works on architecture and city planning (particularly Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City*), New Media theorists have explored exploration. How does a work of art change when it can be entered and experienced in three dimensions? Although the term “virtual reality” is somewhat outdated in 2007, many of the same concerns raised by the goggles and motion-sensing gloves

also apply to virtual environments represented on a flat screen. We might even consider the Internet itself to be an extended metaphor about the exploration of space. It hardly seems surprising that many of the typical metaphors associated with the net—*Internet Explorer*, *Netscape Navigator*, *Safari*, Web “sites”—seem preoccupied with spatial exploration, and one of Microsoft’s most familiar catchphrases is “Where do you want to go today?” What is the nature of the relationship between this “you” and the world? Is it possible to “go somewhere” without leaving your computer desk? How do we really experience space anyhow?

Questions like this beg the question of who “we” are anyway, and New Media theorists like Anna Dempsey have long been aware of the inherent difficulty surrounding the concept of “Self.” Paradoxes as old as Descartes and Plato return to haunt disembodied minds floating in virtual environments. For example, many virtual spaces—such as the best-selling *World of Warcraft* or the ever-popular *Second Life*—require players to create at least one “avatar,” or a character that represents them in the virtual world. Through their avatars, players are allowed to explore, interact, and inhabit a world that could never exist in reality. While some players create avatars that resemble themselves, others delight in exploring different roles. A male player might choose a female avatar, for instance. Other gamers might create and play several different avatars, exploring many different roles simultaneously. Players often become so engrossed (or “immersed”) in playing their avatars that they neglect not only their immediate environment, but even their own bodily needs, such as eating and sleeping. Eventually, the boundaries between their “real” Self and their avatars might erode to the point where reality is merely an inconvenience. Can we accurately describe such a person as having a stable, unified consciousness? On a less abstract level, can we still say “I think, therefore I am” in a world of rampant identity theft? Questions about Self

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