
Power, Identity and Life in the Digital Age

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Introduction

‘We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves’ (Giddens, 1991: 75).

Michael Foucault (1991) describes the operation of modern power using Jeremy Bentham’s design of the Panopticon, where people are disciplined into obedience by being tied to a particular space according to a timetable where they are under constant surveillance. The watchful supervisors monitor the supervised and, in turn, the supervised monitor themselves in what Foucault describes as ‘technologies of the self’, a set of practices which modify and affect one’s behaviour and thinking (Martin, Gutman & Hutton, 1988). While these techniques have changed over time (e.g. the religious confessional, prisons, schools and the modern office), the operation of power has been materially grounded; it was located in space and time and it depended upon mutual engagement between the supervisors and the supervised for the arrangement to work. As Bauman (2000) points out, the strategy is expensive and time-consuming with regards to the material infrastructure and manpower.

The digital age has produced new strategies which are cost-effective, largely because face-to-face engagement is no longer necessary. Electronic communication can take place at a distance, removing the need for expensive infrastructure and the co-presence of supervisors with the supervised. Computer keystrokes can be automatically recorded, making surveillance a simple and comprehensive affair. People are free to roam under the gaze of security cameras, which store scenes of public and private spaces in centralized systems which can be retrieved at any time. Mobile phones permit the location of the user to be ascertained, and credit cards ensure purchases are recorded. There are digital footprints of our every move in modern times.

The new set of practices for the operation of power function independently of space and time. Corporate managers operate private and former state-operated institutions from afar in areas which include finance, healthcare, education, transport, employment, communication and public utilities; even water supplies come under corporate ownership. These corporate managers can respond by email in seconds, and equally they can disappear; no longer accessible, answerable or responsible. These absent managers are members of corporate boards which have a common goal of maximizing profit, accompanied with a lack of responsibility should things collapse. Bauman (2000: 11) explains:

The end of Panopticon augurs *the end of the era of mutual engagement*: between the supervisors and the supervised, capital and labour, leaders and their followers, armies at war. The prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement with its cumbersome corollaries of order-building, order-maintenance and the responsibility for the consequences of it all as well as of the necessity to bear their costs (Bauman, 2000: 11).

The disintegration of social and political networks and institutions tied to territorial borders have given way to transience, fluidity and rapid change in the pursuit of profit. '[I]t is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today—not the durability and lasting reliability of the product' (Bauman, 2000: 14). Corporate greed, disengagement and lack of responsibility are evident in the financial crisis which unfolded in October 2008, a global economic meltdown left to governments to resolve. The turmoil in the financial markets, described by former US Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan as a 'once in a century credit tsunami'¹, took place at an astonishing speed across the world, reflecting the interconnectedness of the financial sectors in the global market and the lack of corporate responsibility attached to that system.

If identity is linked to views of the self, role-relationships and group memberships in society traditionally endorsed and supported by the state, what happens in the present age of fluidity, evasion and constant change in a globalised consumer world? Does identity necessarily become the object of constant transformation, an area of contestation and trouble (Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008)? At first glance, it would appear that the 'liquidification' (Bauman, 2000) of stable social frameworks and institutions requires individuals and groups to adapt in order to survive: '[t]oday's respected authorities will be ridiculed, snubbed or despised tomorrow, celebrities will be forgotten, trend-setting idols will be remembered only on TV quizzes ... indestructible powers will fade and dissipate, mighty political or economic establishments will be swallowed up by even mightier ones, or just vanish ...' (Bauman, 2004: 51).

In this case, how can we address the issue of power and identity when traditional approaches in sociolinguistics are based on more or less stable social networks and institutions, face-to-face interactions, and the study of linguistic difference? In today's digital world, new approaches to power and identity are needed to track identities, and these approaches must incorporate a multimodal framework to include resources beyond language to ensure that the images, photographs, videos and interactive digital media genres which play a major role in identity construction are taken into account. As Iedema and Caldas-Coulthard (2008: 6) explain 'Identity is linguistic/discursive and multi-modal or semiotic: identity is the things we say, do, gesture, posture, wear, possess, create, and so on'. Changes in identity brought about by patterns of visual, auditory and somatic choices need to be traced through time to understand the mechanisms and relations between power, identity and life in the digital age.

The approach adopted in this chapter is Michael Halliday's (1978, 2004) social semiotic theory, because this theory is applicable beyond language for the study of images and visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), displayed art (O'Toole, 1994), music and sound (van Leeuwen, 1999) and the integration of semiotic choices in multimodal phenomena (e.g. Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Bateman, 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; O'Halloran, 2004). Halliday's (1978, 2004) social semiotic theory provides a conceptual framework for analyzing the individual and social

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7687101.stm>

dimensions of identity construction, where identity is the product of three strands of meaning (a) interpersonal relations; (b) ideational or experiential and logical content; and (c) the compositional integration of visual, auditory and somatic choices. The strength of Halliday's theory is that the three dimensions of meaning are analysed using a common framework where semiotic resources (e.g. language, images, actions, gestures, clothing, and so forth) are conceptualized as functional systems which work together to create individual and group identities.

Halliday's (1978, 2004) social semiotic theory is used in this chapter to analyse the ways in which identity is constructed and marketed in digital media in video trailers advertising *The Sims Online* (2002) and *Second Life* (2003), two online virtual worlds which draw from everyday life. The ways in which identity is constructed in the video trailers produced by the companies responsible for the online virtual games are related to transformation and change in the globalised consumer-market world of today. The concept of identity is first considered in more detail below.

Approaches to Identity

Buckingham (2008) explains that there are several meanings of identity. First, identity is something considered unique to individuals, something which is more or less consistent over time. On the other hand, it embodies a relationship with some form of collective or social group in terms of a national identity, cultural identity or gender identity where there is some common element across individuals. People are the product of their unique biographies, yet who they are varies according to whom they are with, the situation and their motivations at the time. Furthermore, people do not choose how they are defined, rather a complicated mix of socio-cultural factors results in identity configurations which vary according to social class, ethnicity, age, race and gender. Buckingham (2008) divides the two approaches to identity into psychological and sociological paradigms, with a range of subdisciplines and intellectual paradigms such as developmental psychology, social theory, symbolic interactionism and cultural studies.

Identity is not an enduring entity. In the psychological and social sense, it is a complex process involving social actors, actions and circumstances which change over time and context. Social actors interact consciously and subconsciously, giving rise to semiotic choices which form individual and group identities. As Lemke (2008a) points out, these identities involve multiplicities and hybridity as individuals learn to perform a diverse range of identities in interactions across communities. Lemke (2008a) suggests that notions of identity should be scale-differentiated, from the short-times scale of interactions to the larger institutional scale and life spans. Lemke (2008a: 18) explains that identities are integrated 'by means of the material continuity of bodies and other socially meaningful material constructions across time'. Furthermore, identities are no longer linked to institutions; 'recurrent styles of traversals and linkages we make among and across institutions become more important' (Lemke, 2008a: 40), a fact which relates to the disintegration of social and political networks and institutions tied to nation states.

In the digital world, Boyd (2008: 120) explains that online interactive media sites have four dimensions which are not present in face-to-face interactions; persistence, searchability, replicability, and invisible audiences. These dimensions fundamentally change the social dynamics, the formation of identity and the negotiation of social roles because interactions are instantaneous, unbounded by physical proximity, material context and time. Therefore, the ways in which producers of online virtual worlds formulate the concept of identity are investigated in this chapter, with the aim of understanding how online virtual worlds conceptualise individual and group identities. Traditional approaches to identity include (1) self identity and (2) group identity. In this

chapter, identity is extended to include (3) virtual identity.

- (1) X (self) identifies X (self)
- (2) X (self) identifies with Y (group)
- (3) Y (self) identifies with Y (self and group in virtual world)

The focus of this investigation is the marketing of identity in online virtual worlds by the companies which produce the games, rather than the analysis of how players actually create representations of themselves and negotiate social relations in virtual worlds, a research project beyond the scope of this paper². The concept of 'consumer identity' is introduced before *The Sims Online* and *Second Life* video trailers are analysed.

Consumer Identity

Machin and van Leeuwen (2008) investigate the uneasy tension existing between (a) models of identity as 'the citizen' imposed by nation states and reinforced in families, educational systems and other national institutions, and (b) models of identity as 'the consumer' constructed by global corporations and spread through marketing in the global media. Citizen identities are more or less stable because they are linked to 'who you are' in terms of age, race, nationality and 'what you do' in terms of qualifications and profession. On the other hand, marketing formulations of identity are 'lifestyle identities' which are changeable clusters of behaviours, attitudes and consumption patterns (Chaney, 1996; Machin & van Leeuwen, 2008; Mitchell, 1978). Machin and van Leeuwen (2008) found that lifestyle identity classifications in magazines are relatively unsystematic, including categories such as what people do (e.g. job, leisure time activities and patterns of consumption) and physical appearance and prowess, often in the form of pop psychological classifications which focus on individual traits. Attitudes, values and preferences attached to lifestyle identities are linked to material goods such as clothing, accessories, homes and interior decoration.

As Bauman (2000) emphasizes, fluidity and change in modern life is directly related to the consumer market, and therefore the fact that lifestyle identities are variable and unsystematic is no surprise, given their link to patterns of consumption, which in turn are regulated by corporations aiming to make a profit. It becomes important to understand how companies formulate and market individual and group identities in the age of digital media, hence the analysis of *The Sims Online* and *Second Life* video trailers. What interpersonal, ideational and textual dimensions of personal and group identities are promoted in the trailers for these games? How do these identities intersect across other media and genres in real life, and how do they relate to the notion of fluidity in a global market economy? These questions are considered below.

Identity in Online Virtual Worlds

Online virtual worlds are computer-based simulated environments in which users create avatars—two or three-dimensional graphic representations of human beings or other graphic or text-based beings—which communicate through local chat and instant messaging. Most virtual worlds allow for multiple users who interact online where they engage in various activities and

² Children's online virtual worlds are being investigated in the *Events in the World* research project in the Multimodal Analysis Lab, Interactive and Digital Media Institute (IDMI) at the National University of Singapore (<http://multimodal-analysis-lab.org/projects/projects-events.html>). The project is funded by the Media Development Authority (MDA) Singapore under the National Research Foundation (NRF) (NRF2007IDM-IDM002-066).

form relationships and groups across time and space (see Lemke, 2005). There is no predefined goal in online virtual worlds, and the game play is open ended.

(a) *The Sims Online*

The Sims, created by Will Wright, published by Maxis and distributed by Electronic Arts, is a life-simulation computer game where players construct avatars that interact in a household near SimCity. *The Sims* was first released in 2000 and multiple expansion packs followed, including the release of *The Sims Online* in 2002 and *The Sims 2* in 2004.



(a) *The Sims*



(b) *The Sims 2*



(c) *The Sims 3*

Fig. 1 Screenshots

Electronic Arts announced in March 2007 that *The Sims Online* would be re-branded as *EA-Land* and released with major enhancements to the game. However, Electronic Arts shut the online game down a year later, stating that they were moving onto other projects³. The release of the computer game *The Sims 3* is scheduled for 2009⁴, where the Sims interact in neighborhoods rather than being confined to houses. The screenshots from *The Sims*, *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3* in Figure 1 show the increasing sophistication of the computer graphics and the accompanying expansion of semiotic meaning potential (e.g. colour, light and stylization of the avatars) over the past eight years.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sims_Online

⁴ <http://thesims3.ea.com/view/pages/home.jsp>

The transcript from an Electronic Arts (2002) video trailer⁵ for *The Sims Online* appears in the boxed text. The bold text in the transcript corresponds to enlarged and bold font in the typography in the video trailer. Screenshots from *The Sims Online* are displayed in Figure 2. The soundtrack is repetitive upbeat dance music which creates a dynamic rhythmic tempo as the video unfolds with written text, scenes from the game and pictures of the avatars.

The **#1 PC game** of all-time **GOES ONLINE!**
THE SIMS ONLINE
join a **massive** world built by thousands of players
play as yourself or your alter-ego
explore neighbourhoods, make friends, host events
run a business, how you play is limited only by your **imagination**
“That’s your Queue ...” [says a blond girl in a red dress]
“Uuh?” [says a blond guy with sunglasses & suit]
“Clever, isn’t he?” [says the blond girl in the red dress]
[Various scenes: outdoor jacuzzi, indoor futuristic room, café, disco, swimming pool with text “this place looks great”, disco dancing, lounge room and hybrid-functional rooms]
[Pictures of Sims faces]
CREATE AND CUSTOMIZE your Sim
Play as **YOURSELF**
“Or Somebody else” [range of pictures of Sims]
an amazing variety of **FACES, CLOTHES**
and endless **APPEARANCE** choices
“does this make me look fat?” [says the blond hair man with suit top & kilt]
[Picture with palette choices showing how to create characters]
[Pictures of Sims faces]
“That’s Better” [says blond man, now in singlet and tight jeans]
build a thriving business
build the trendiest boutique
build your dream home
“Finally my very own **Big screen Barbeque Garage!**” [says man in singlet and yellow workman’s hat]
“There goes the neighbourhood” [says female punk rocker]
[Scenes of the land divided into blocks, zoom into houses, various scenes of house interiors which change and people moving about]
[Pictures of Sims faces]
meet, flirt and **INTERACT** with other real Sims
through **CHAT** and **INSTANT MESSAGING**
“and thousands of animations!” [says girl in bikini]
[Scenes of people dancing, a band playing, people socialising, a wedding, a jacuzzi, lounge room dancing and so forth]
[Pictures of Sims faces]
DEVELOP friendships & business relationships
and track your **SUCCESS**
on your way to the **TOP 100**
“**BE FAMOUS**” [says young black man]
“**BE INFAMOUS**” [says young woman in black skimpy dress]
BE BOLD, BE BIZARRE, BE SILLY, BE HIP, BE FUNNY, BE A FLIRT, BE A ROCK STAR, BE A DANCER, BE THERE, BE POPULAR, BE WILD, BE A BULLY, BE A BOMBSHELL, BE A BEAR, BE A NERD, BE A STUD, BE A GENIUS, BE AN ALIEN, BE A PEST, BE, SOMEBODY, BE SOMEBODY. ELSE™
THE SIMS ONLINE 2002 © Electronic Arts Inc. All rights reserved.

5 <http://www.fileplanet.com/131197/130000/fileinfo/Sims-2-Gameplay-Video> Also, see similar trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLMvXY7jf4>

The Sims Online video trailer engages the viewer through the dance music and the vibrant scenes of leisure activities where avatars socialise and have fun dancing, swimming, talking, playing music, attending weddings and so forth. The scenes include a swimming pool, jacuzzi, casino, café, disco and futuristic-looking multipurpose rooms which the players decorate using interior design palette menus. The palette menus for the avatars include choices for gender, age, body shape, and clothes, and mood choices can be attached to the characters (e.g. ‘Happy’, ‘Freakout’, ‘DownN’out’ and ‘Attitude’). The scenes are bright and colourful, and they are presented in rapid succession, in time with the beat of the music.

The linguistic text in the video trailer has the simple textual organisation found in chat rooms and casual conversation. Approximately three quarters of the speech functions in the video are commands, congruently expressed through imperative mood. The verbiage attached to the avatars is expressed in speech bubbles and it consists of simple statements, often involving ellipsis (see Figure 2). The main function of the video trailer is interpersonal: to engage the viewer through a rapid succession of scene changes, upbeat music and commands to undertake actions in the game. Viewers are encouraged to ‘join a massive world build by thousands of players’, ‘play as yourself or your alter-ego’, ‘explore neighbourhoods’, ‘make friends’, ‘host events’, ‘run a business’, ‘build a thriving business’, ‘build the trendiest boutique’ and ‘build your dream home’. Nearly two thirds of the process types are relational processes, where attributes and values are attached to players, typically in the form of personality characteristics (e.g. ‘be bold’, ‘be bizarre’, ‘be silly’, ‘be hip’, ‘be famous’ and ‘be infamous’). Players are encouraged to become identifiable characters (‘be a flirt’, ‘be a bully’, ‘be a bombshell’, ‘be a nerd’ and ‘be a stud’) with identifiable occupations in the world of pop culture (e.g. ‘be a rock star’ and ‘be a dancer’). The video trailer concludes with the appeal to ‘be somebody’ and ‘be somebody else’ displayed in Figure 3.

From the video trailer, we may see that *The Sims Online* is an ultimate ‘lifestyle identifier’, in terms of personality characteristics, consumption (clothes, material goods and interior design) and physical appearance where the body itself becomes a site for customisation (e.g. ‘an amazing variety of **FACES**, **CLOTHES** and endless **APPEARANCE** choices’). ‘Does this make me look fat?’ asks the blond avatar in Figure 2. *The Sims 3* homepage⁶ explicitly advertises that identity creation and customization are key concerns of the game:

New Create A Sim—Create any Sim you can imagine.

New Realistic Personalities—Every Sim is now a truly unique person, with a distinct personality.

New Unlimited Customization—Everyone can customize everything.

New Gameplay That’s Rewarding & Quick—There’s more to life for your Sims in *The Sims 3*.

The screen shot in Figure 3 from a video featured on *The Sims 3* homepage illustrates the detail in which the avatars can be customised; from facial features which include the shape of the nose, face and eyes to characteristics such as age, gender, look, personality traits, clothing and voice. Players engage with each other through simple instant chat and visual icons that can be inserted in place of linguistic text, as displayed in the screenshot from *The Sims 3* website⁷ in Figure 4. The reinforcement of gender stereotypes is evident in the heart icon which is attached to the thought bubble for the woman in Figure 4.

The Sims game is concerned with lifestyle identifiers in the form of physical appearance, clothing and character attributes as the major markers of personal and group identities. These

6 <http://thesims3.ea.com/view/pages/home.jsp>

7 <http://thesims3.ea.com/view/pages/screenshots.jsp>



Fig. 2 *The Sims Online* (2002) Video Trailer Screenshots

Fig. 3 *The Sims 3* Screenshot (1)Fig. 4 *The Sims 3* Screenshot (2)

identities form the basis for the social activities which take place in scenes constructed using the interior design palettes, which are lifestyle identifiers in terms of consumption. While *The Sims 3* homepage refers to the psychological dimension of identity (e.g. ‘Every Sim is now a truly unique person, with a distinct personality’) the video trailer for *The Sims Online* focuses on physical appearance, social interactions and the places in which these activities take place. The players are encouraged to build things, including ‘a thriving business’. The monofunctional tendency (O’Toole, 1994) of *The Sims Online* video is interpersonal, given the visual, linguistic and music choices which function to engage the viewer and to promote individual appearance, social roles and group identities, and consumer goods and activities in what becomes an ultimate lifestyle identifier game.

(b) **Second Life**

Second Life (for users aged 18 and over) and its subset *Teen Second Life* (for users aged 13–17) are online virtual game worlds, developed by Linden Research Inc and launched in 2003. Players construct avatars, known as residents, which take part in different activities in the game. *Second Life* has its own currency, Linden dollars, which residents use to exchange virtual property and services. An advertising video trailer⁸ for *Second Life* is transcribed in the boxed text and screen shots from the trailer are displayed in Figure 5. The sound track is new age mood music, featuring the piano.

⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3f_gGjXQaLM

IN 2003 LINDEN LABS CREATED A VIRTUAL WORLD ... [Scene: magical garden]
... THAT INSPIRED MILLIONS OF PEOPLE TO LIVE A SECOND LIFE ... [Scene: magical seaside]
... A WORLD BUILT WITH THE IMAGINATION OF ITS RESIDENTS ... [Scene: ornate castle]
... WHERE FANTASY HAS NO LIMITS ... [Scene: magical fountain]
... WHERE LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP ... [Scene: couple embracing overlooking water]
... GO BEYOND NEW BORDERS EVERY DAY ... [Scene: young girl with young man]
... A NEW MILLION DOLLAR MARKET ... [Scene: man at café in square]
... LINDEN DOLLARS WITH THEIR OWN EXCHANGE RATE ... [Scene: man at café in square]
... WHERE ANYONE CAN BE A FAMOUS DESIGNER ... [Scene: girl with pink hair & white dress]
... A FAMOUS DECORATOR, A SOCIALITE ... [Scene: girl with blond hair dancing]
... A PLACE WHERE NEW MONUMENTS RISE ... [Scene: magical buildings on mountain]
... AND OTHERS ARE REINVENTED ... [Scene: picture of castle]
... WHERE ANYONE CAN SHARE HIS/HER VISION OF ART AND OF THE WORLD ... [Scene: blue lagoon/
river with sailing ship]
... WHERE PARALLEL WORLDS CO-EXIST ... [Scene: tropical forest with rain and lightning]
... AND WHERE ALL RACES MINGLE ... [Scene: creature with machine gun and coloured eyes]
... WHERE YOU CAN SIMPLY ROAM WITHOUT A DESTINY ... [Scene: magical scene]
... OR BUILD AN EMPIRE ... [Scene: new world castle with walls]
... TO BE WHAT YOU WANT, TO BE WHO YOU WANT ... [Scene: magical woman in water]
... JUST BE THE BEING THAT LIVES WITHIN EACH OF US ... [Scene: strange figure in with waterfall]
DIRECTED & EDITED BY HUGO ALMEIDA [HALDEN BEAUMONT] [Scene: ocean, water fall, greenery,
magical tropical], TRANSLATION WINTER WARDHANI, THANKS TO WITCH FARGIS, ANA LUTETIA,
TOMMI PLANER, VIKTOR STROGANOFF, COPYRIGHT: "SECOND LIFE® AND LINDEN LAB®
ARE TRADEMARKS OR REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF LINDEN RESEARCH, INCL. ALL RIGHTS
RESERVED. NO INFRINGEMENT IS INTENDED"

The *Second Life* video trailer promotes themes of fantasy, romance, fame and a million dollar market in the magical settings of virtual 'parallel worlds' where the user can 'simply roam without a destiny' or 'build an empire'. Water is a constant feature in the scenes: i.e. oceans, rivers, waterfalls, fountains, rain and underwater scenes create fantasy worlds complete with mythical creatures. When humans are featured, they are identifiable as handsome young successful business entrepreneurs, and beautiful young female decorators and socialites (see Figure 5). Therefore, lifestyle identifiers are reinforced in terms of appearance, clothing and job identification. In addition, *Second Life* reaches out to one's psychological self, for example, '... TO BE WHAT YOU WANT ...', '... TO BE WHO YOU WANT ...', and '... JUST BE THE BEING THAT LIVES WITHIN EACH OF US ...'. The focus in *Second Life* is more orientated towards the psychological self and romance compared to *The Sims*, presumably because the game is aimed at an older audience.

The written text in the video trailer unfolds as a series of statements in declarative mood which give information about *Second Life*. Approximately half the processes are relational processes which are textually organised to foreground the attributes of *Second Life* through ellipsis of the subject which is 'Second Life' (e.g. '... A NEW MILLION DOLLAR Market ...', '... LINDEN DOLLARS WITH THEIR OWN EXCHANGE RATE ...', '... A PLACE WHERE NEW MONUMENTS RISE ...' and '... AND OTHERS ARE REINVENTED ...'). Material processes are used to encourage players to explore the game and to build empires.

The tone of the *Second Life* video is evocative through the music score, the font style of the text (see Figure 5) and the graphics which unfold to create a magical mystical world which engages the viewer. The pace is slow, and this is accentuated through the pauses '...' in the written text. Players are promised fantasy, love, and romance, where anyone can be anything they desire in a world where amazing buildings and empires exist, where 'races mingle'. The basis for this world

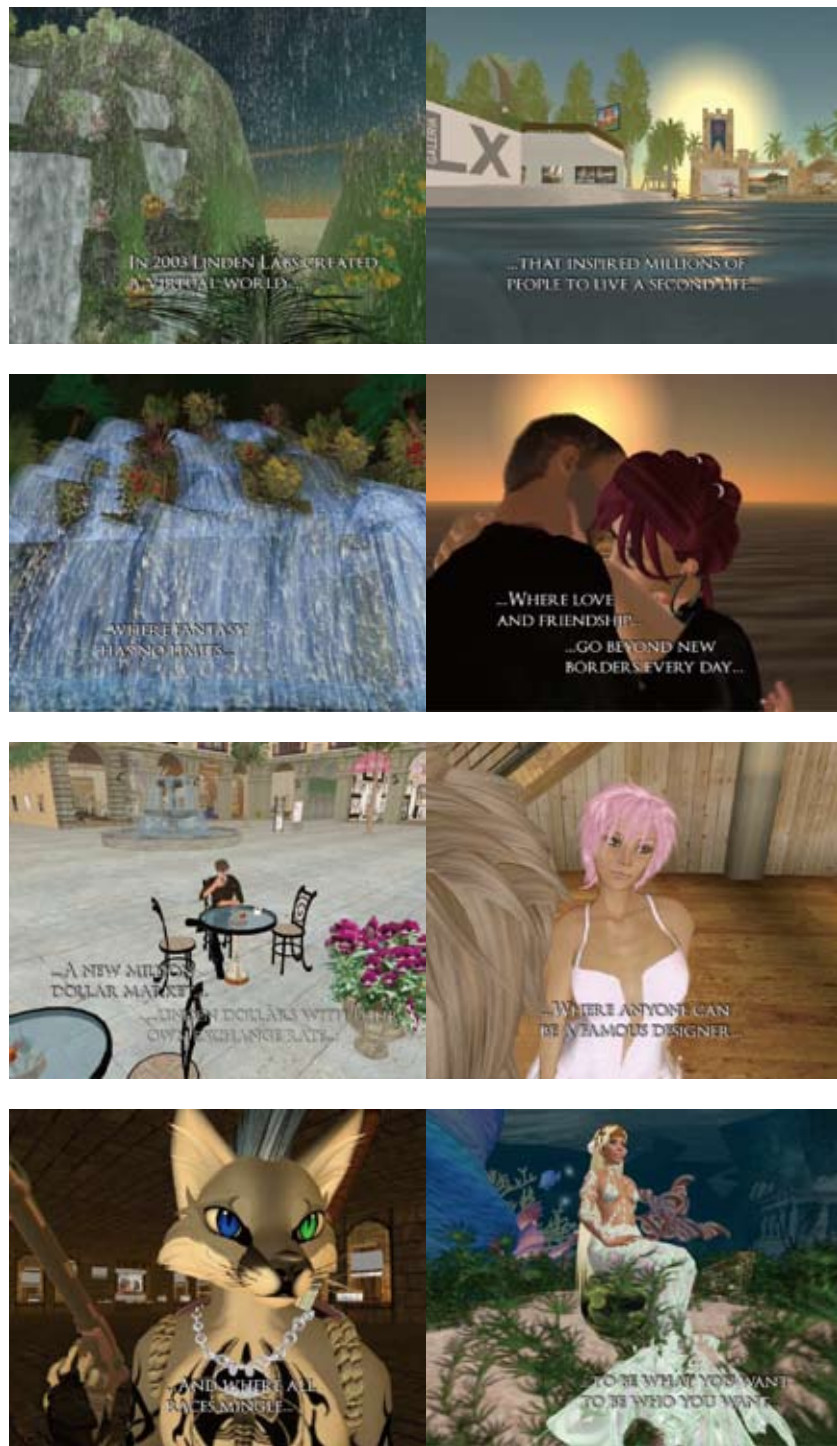


Fig. 5 *Second Life* (2003) Video Trailer Screenshots

is an economic market, where Linden dollars are used to purchase goods and services, explicitly modelling the real world in terms of consumer culture. *Second Life* is promoted as unparalleled opportunity to participate in the world of consumerism and the creation of a lifestyle identity in terms of appearance and material possessions.



(a) *Second Life* Home Page



(b) *Teen Second Life* Home Page

Fig. 6



Fig. 7 *Club Penguin* Online Virtual World for Young Children

The *Second Life* website⁹ has a similar focus on lifestyle identifiers, as seen in Figure 6 (a) where the home page features a young couple and the text ‘Your world, your imagination’ and ‘Discover a whole new world of friends, fashion music, videos and fun! Explore the best of Second Life’. While *Teen Second Life* home page¹⁰ contains life style identifiers as well (‘Ashley Dassin’ who is a ‘jewelry/ accessory designer’ in Figure 6 (b)), the emphasis is similar to *The Sims Online* in that groups and social activities are promoted for the younger players with avatars which are young trendy people having fun. (e.g. ‘Hang out with your friends at the Coffee Spot in Teen Second Life’ and ‘Tell a friend’).

Online virtual game worlds extend beyond the teenage and adult market. For example, *Club Penguin*¹¹, an online virtual world for young children, has lifestyle identifiers in terms of coffee shops, nightclubs and gift shops and discos (see Figure 7), replicating the social worlds found in *The Sims Online*, *Teen Second Life* and *Second Life*.

9 <http://teen.secondlife.com/>

10 <http://secondlife.com/>

11 <http://www.clubpenguin.com/>

Power, Identity, Consumerism and Digital Media

“... [D]eception and invention frame the production of every individual’s ordinary social life. We are continually introduced to situations in which lies and distortions are exercised; [yet] ... society rests on assumptions of trust and reciprocity.... At the same time, we know these principles are constantly violated. [M]uch of the training for this dual and divided mentality is delivered through popular culture ...” (Finkelstein, 2007: 2)

Lemke (2004, 2008a)¹² theorises the relationship between media and identity in the globalised consumer market as ‘transmedia franchises’ which he defines as the intertextual networks of genres and media which people traverse in their everyday life. Lemke (2004) explains that these franchises are powerful mechanisms for shaping ideas about the social world because they appear in many forms across different media over extended periods of time. For example, *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Disney* and *Star Trek* identities are marketed through films, websites, online fan clubs, toys and other marketing merchandise. In a similar manner, *The Sims 2* website features a news page, fan-site, videos and a *Sims2 Store* where merchandise can be bought. Lemke (2008b) explains that these ‘commercial transmedia promote systems of differentiated and hierarchized identities, identity markets, which we learn to re-appropriate and re-organize as members of social networks’. As we have seen in this chapter, these identities are lifestyle identifiers which focus on physical appearance, consumer goods, and group activities for younger players and romance and the financial market for older players.

The intertextual consumer network is more comprehensive than transmedia franchises, however. For example, transmedia franchises such as *The Sims* and *Second Life* intertwine with other consumer markets in music, film and entertainment industries, forming an intertextual consumer network complex. For example, *The Sims 2* machinima¹³ based on Kristin Chenoweth’s song, *Taylor, the Latte Boy*¹⁴ displayed in Figure 8 (a) is intertextually linked to her live performance of the song in *You Tube*¹⁵ in Figure 8 (b), a site which contains videos of every conceivable genre. Similarly, avatars in sites such as *Yahoo! Asia* in Figure 9 (a) appear alongside ‘Red Carpet Moments’ with famous celebrities in Figure 9 (b).

The intertextual consumer network complex is a wide reaching set of hybrid and ‘remediated’ genres (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) which connect across space and time, beyond the immediate transmedia franchises in what has become the consumer cult of celebrity, fame and fortune. The strength of the network is evident in Figure 10, where the socialite in *Second Life* video exactly replicates the body, movement, hair and clothing of Britney Spears, a pop singer featured in mainstream news, the tabloids, official fan websites, music websites, women’s magazines, Wikipedia, *You Tube*, television entertainment news and talkback shows. In the age of transformation and change, Britney Spears’ rise and fall is comprehensively documented and it continues to be a topic of much speculation across multiple sites and genres.

Connections between the real world and digital worlds are evident in Figure 11 (a)–(b) where scenes from a trailer for *Call of Duty 4* computer game are replicated in a video produced by the person responsible for the Virginia Tech massacre which took place on 16 April 2007. The question

12 Lemke (2004) can be downloaded from: <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jaylemke/papers/Franchises/Valencia-CDA-Franchises.htm>

13 Machinima is ‘a portmanteau of machine cinema a collection of associated production techniques whereby computer-generated imagery (GI) is rendered using real-time, interactive 3-D engines, such as those of games, instead of professional 3D animation software. Engines from first-person shooter and role-playing simulation video games are typically used’. <http://www.wowwiki.com/Machinima>

14 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkK6fmj3SdI>

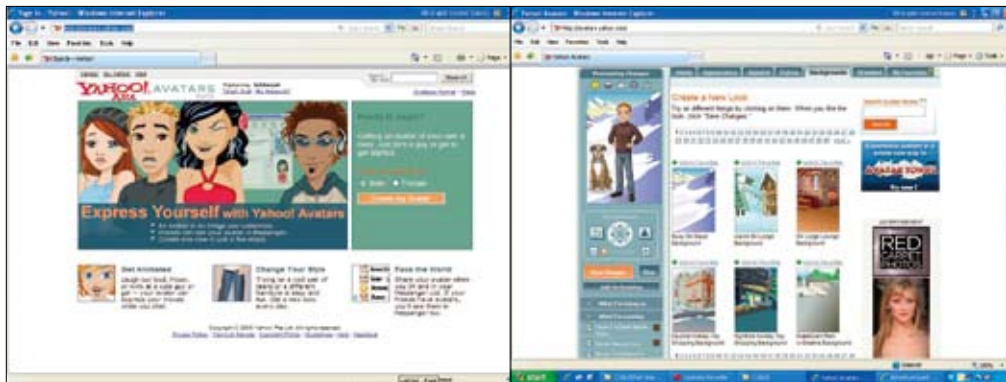
15 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXS0nEOx_20



(a) Taylor, the Latte Boy Machinima

(b) Taylor, the Latte Boy Song

Fig. 8



(a) Avatars in Yahoo! Asia website

(b) Avatars in Yahoo! Asia website with 'Red Carpet Moments'

Fig. 9



Fig. 10 Britney Spears and the *Second Life* Socialite

(a) *Call of Duty 4* Game Trailer

(b) Virginia Tech Massacre April 2007

Fig. 11

is, how do we come to terms with these intertextual links and understand the relationship between power, identity, consumerism in digital media and the everyday world of today?

Power, Identity and Consumerism in the Digital Age

Industries reflect the world through consumer choices, but they also shape the world by offering a limited set of choices, giving rise to Foucault's view of consumerism as a technology of the self (Martin et al., 1988). We need to understand how commercial forces 'both create opportunities and set limitations to young people's digital cultures', particularly how 'these media provide young people with symbolic resources for constructing or expressing their own identities' (Buckingham, 2008: 5). In addition, we need to understand subversive shifts in identity construction (Turkle, 1995) and other creative strategies through which resistance to consumer culture takes place. For example, Willet (2008) analyses the online activities of young girls to examine the influence of commercial industries in a way which recognizes young peoples' active engagement with the resources these industries offer. The research was undertaken in light of findings which suggest

that online activities are sites for increasingly sophisticated marketing strategies. Willet (2008) concludes that there were tensions within the research; on one hand, online communities provide important spaces for girls' development, expression and access to alternative cultures, yet there was also evidence that these spaces are not free and open environments.

It is clear, then, that online virtual worlds such as *The Sims* and *Second Life* actively promote lifestyle identifiers focusing on physical appearance, consumer goods, group activities, romance and the financial market. Young children and teenagers learn that identity depends on appearance and material goods, and adults learn that you can have what the consumer market dictates you want in virtual worlds, if not in the real world. In addition, it becomes clear that these games do not exist in isolation; they are part of a larger intertextual consumer network complex stretching across multiple domains. As state-operated institutions dwindle in the wake of global corporatisation, it appears that citizen identities (i.e. who you are and what you do) are overshadowed by lifestyle identifiers in an age where fluidity, transformation and change form the basis for a global world run by corporations motivated by profit. And yet simultaneously, digital media do provide creative forums for creativity and resistance, and hope for the future.

Lemke (2004) asks what theory and practices are needed to assess the affordances, effects, and dangers of transmedia franchises, and we can extend that question to address the relationship between power, consumerism and identity in the intertextual consumer network complex of today. The operation of power and technologies of the self have changed in the digital era, and our theories and methods of analysis in the social sciences require updating too. Software for multimodal analysis of videos, television, film texts and internet sites are being developed in the Multimodal Analysis Lab at the National University of Singapore¹⁶ in an attempt to understand the functionalities and integration of semiotic resources as they combine within and across different media. This is a first step towards developing and using interactive digital media for analytical purposes, where the semiotic meaning potential of the tool approximates the semiotic meaning potential of the multimodal phenomena under analysis. The combined skills of social scientists working with computer scientists may be a productive way forward for understanding power, identity and life in the digital era.

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¹⁶ For further information, see <http://multimodal-analysis-lab.org/>

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