

Inhabiting MySpace: 'If you're not on MySpace, you don't exist'

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In 21st century technoculture it is no longer possible to consider space in terms of the strictly dichotomized here/there, near/far or even, nowhere/everywhere, which dominated our understanding at the beginning of the twentieth century. Technological developments ranging from the telephone through to television, cinema, videos, videogames and the internet have created a credible impression of presence, where we may feel immersed in environments beyond our physical bodies within which we may interact (Richardson and Harper). These technologies may be broadly referred to as telepresencing technologies. Tele-technologies create unAustralia, which is a 'no place in which...two [or more] people...meet:' a virtual environment for potential agency (Morse 17).

In this paper I will consider the technologically enabled phenomenon of MySpace, examining the ways in two unsigned Perth bands have used MySpace's reach to target market their music directly to their respective audiences, grow their fan bases and network with other unAustralian bands and promoters without the costs associated with newspaper, radio and television advertising. I will suggest however, that ~~while~~ MySpace, which is an unstate of unAustralia, concerns its inhabitants as a potential field for agency, and inhabiting it simultaneously enables certain types of communication and agency while constraining others. Thus, I suggest MySpace serves as a microenvironment which, in a sense, facilitates social existence.

The notion of a facilitating microenvironment relies primarily on conceiving of a plurality of social spaces, including technologically enabled social spaces which map affinities between bodies and meanings (Shields 148). Microenvironments, as the name

suggests, are small environments which exist within, or intersect with, other environments in what Thrift describes as:

a constantly expanding universe of spaces and territories, each of which provides different kinds of inhabitation – from the border-ing provided by the womb, through all the things in the home that are just out of reach, through the corporeal traces of buildings and landscapes that provide a kind of half-remembered poetics (Thrift 1)

Spatial perception is crucial to our understanding of ourselves as agents involved with/in the world, not only in so far as our perceptual field centres on where we are bodily, but up and down, forward and backward, and side to side are all related to how one would act or move within that field. That is, as Charles Taylor points out, it is:

as a bodily agent functioning in a gravitational field that ‘up’ and ‘down’ have meaning for me... Without a sense of ‘which way is up’, I falter into confusion (Taylor 4).

For Merleau-Ponty, to exist is necessarily to occupy and move through space. Space, as a potential field for agency, structures and is structured by perception. He therefore urges that we must acknowledge that we inhabit space as corporeal beings, who live and sustain ourselves only through our efforts to be in the world (Merleau-Ponty 16).

While the focus of this paper is a particular virtual space: MySpace, I have used microenvironments in the plural to signify the multiple specific environments which we may inhabit consecutively and simultaneously and which are constituted by and constitute our particular lifeworld, or the world as it is for us (Ihde Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth). As Thrift (2006), tells us:

everything, is spatially distributed, down to the smallest monad; since the invention of the microscope, at least, even the head of a pin has been seen to have its own geography. Every space is shot through with other spaces in ways that are not just consequential outcomes of some other quality but live because they have that distribution. It is a bit like modern biology, which has discovered that the process of cell growth relies on a sense of where things are to produce particular parts of an organism, a sense that is more than just the provision of a map but rather is a fundamental part of the process of growth, built into the constitution of organ-ism itself (2)

As Don Ihde (1934) suggests, we do a considerable amount of our living in what he describes as a 'technosphere' or technological cocoons or envelopes where we may explore environments which may be considered 'strange and hostile to our normal being' but which also 'give us a sense of familiarity which seems difficult to escape (Ihde Technics and Praxis 14). Hart Cohen reinforces Ihde's notion of the taken for grantedness of our media environments by reminding us of McLuhan's metaphor about fish being unaware of the water in which they swim (Cohen 7). Yet, like fish who will die if removed from water, not being in MySpace can spell a form of social death.

One American teenager is reported as saying that 'if you're not on MySpace, you don't exist' (Kempshall 12). In this way it is possible to conceive of MySpace as, not only a microenvironment, but also as a facilitating environment (Winnicott). Winnicott identifies the facilitating environment as the maternal provision, without which there could be no infant (Winnicott 39n). That is, without the facilitating wombic or matrilineal environment, there could be no infant (Winnicott 39n). Hence such matriomorphisms as mother earth, the mother country, Mother Nature, mother tongue, and significantly, motherboard. This concept is analogous to Gregory Bateson's argument that, 'the unit of survival is a flexible organism in its environment' (Bateson 457). Yet, I would argue that the facilitating environment - or more specifically facilitating environments - not only are, but also exceed the maternal provision. That is, the world in both phenomenology and in Winnicottian psychoanalysis is the pre-given environment which facilitates certain types of agency and mediating our existence in medium specific ways.

The brainchild of Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe, MySpace is a social and musical community situated within the virtual province of unAustralia, which was developed in 2003 as a freer version of its forebear, friendster.com (Williams 1). Catching on quickly with teenagers and young adults as a place to host and maintain home pages, linked to those of their friends, MySpace membership grew to twenty seven million

members by August 2005 (Williams 1) and by the end of August 2006, had risen to one hundred million; with an additional five hundred thousand joining weekly (Kempshall 12). MySpace has thus added a whole new dimension to networking in Unaustralia. MySpace is the fourth most popular website in the English speaking world and the most popular in the United States where it generates five per cent of all internet traffic (Kempshall 12). While people have been building and maintaining personal home pages for as long as the Internet has been in existence, MySpace has done a number of innovative things that have contributed to its success, with blogging, pictures and music being three areas that generate a lot of traffic (Williams 1).

According to Tama Leaver MySpace's

biggest drawcard is the clever embedding of music on the site. Music companies and artists have their material on there -- you can't download a song per se, but you can hear the whole thing streaming. Having that across the whole MySpace network is something almost unique, certainly for commercial music (Leaver, cited in (Kempshall 13)

Contrary to Leaver's claim it is, in fact, possible and encouraged, to download music from MySpace, and furthermore to attach that music to your own personal MySpace page. For instance, when my page opens, a song called 'Falling Down: Beer' by Perth band Varial plays as my profile is viewed. This facility has proved a boon, particularly for up and coming bands who need to get exposure to make money but do not have a marketing budget sufficient to traditional media advertising. Therefore, musically speaking, MySpace is an important cultural phenomenon which Virgil Dickerson of Suburban Home Records suggests, is as, if not more important than MTV (Dickerson cited in (Williams)).

The music industry has been quick to attempt to cash-in on MySpace's success with the Australia-specific branch of MySpace recently launching a Secret Shows promotion which involved users adding a specific profile to their own, and in return, being given the details of a live show by a popular music act performed at a secret venue (Kempshall 13). The number of 'adds' reached ten thousand for the first of

these, which was a show by rock band Jet at the Prince of Wales Hotel in St Kilda (Kempshall 13).

MySpace has notched up considerable successes for up-and-coming bands both nationally and internationally. For instance, Kempshall reports that despite being unaware of MySpace's existence, UK band Arctic Monkeys won a record contract on the strength of a wave of word of mouth publicity generated by their fans on MySpace (Kempshall 13). While not every band with a MySpace home page enjoys a meteoric rise to stardom, two unsigned Perth bands have come to enjoy at least moderate recognition which has, in part, been facilitated by MySpace. In what follows I will briefly describe the ways in which 'Varial' and 'Something More' have used MySpace as a marketing and networking medium, sometimes with great success. Subsequently I will make the argument that although MySpace offers the promise of connectivity, networking and prosumption (O'Malley), virtual existence in MySpace is not necessarily as empowering as we might at first imagine: only enabling certain possibilities while simultaneously constraining others.

Sydney punk band, 'Frenzal Rhomb' is a nationally although not necessarily internationally successful band who have been around since 1994 ("The Official Frenzal Rhomb Website"). While Frenzal Rhomb have an official web site they also have had an official MySpace profile since September 2005 ("The Official Frenzal Rhomb Myspace Profile"). In that time they've had over thirty four thousand profile views and have five thousand six hundred and ninety five MySpace friends ("The Official Frenzal Rhomb Myspace Profile"). Frenzal are somewhat of a special case however, as two of their members, Jay and the Doctor are also presenters on Australia's youth radio station, 'Triple J' and consequently often feature on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) music shows.

Having been around for in excess of ten years it is doubtful that MySpace can be said to have attributed to Frenzal Rhomb's success, yet up-and-coming Perth band,

'Varial', has been able to capitalise on their association with Frenzal through the medium of MySpace. 'Varial' have been together in various configurations since 2001, but only began playing shows seriously in 2004 ("Official Varial Myspace Profile"). 'Varial' were quick to recognise the potential of MySpace having been members since July 2004. They have had over ten thousand eight hundred views and currently have nearly five hundred MySpace friends, both nationally and internationally ("Official Varial Myspace Profile"). The three songs that are available to stream or download on their MySpace have had one thousand six hundred and twenty eight, seven thousand nine hundred and eighty five and one thousand one hundred and sixty listens respectively ("Official Varial Myspace Profile"). No figures are available for the number of downloads. Having enjoyed moderate success in the Perth punk scene, 'Varial' were given the Frenzal Rhomb, West Coast tour support in August 2005, prompting MySpace comments such as 'fuck yer marty's band supported Frenzal Rhomb they r fuckin gods' from Dan Darkness is Soy in July 2006 ("Official Varial Myspace Profile").

One of the most fundamental dimensions of semiosis is the 'ordering of bodies in physical space and the relationships between persons in social space' (Hodge and Kress 52). Late in the twentieth century, social scientists such as Durkheim and Edward Hall began to realize that space is not a void but is rather 'a qualitative context situating different behaviours and contending actions' (Shields 147). Combining Yuri Lotman's (1990) notion of the semiosphere with John Hartley's concept of the mediasphere (Hartley) Hodge and Kress (1988) suggest that meaning is produced, reproduced, received and circulated in clusters of semiotic spaces and their boundaries, and that communication can only function in relation to the semiotic space which enfolds it. If semiosis can only function in relation to the semiotic space in which it is immersed, and all language/communication emerges from our embodied perception then our environments, the world, the semiosphere, mediasphere, technosphere as well as the biosphere become crucial as the referential background of language

(Ruthrof). Our environments thus are the predefinitional, preverbal stuff of which language speaks (Merleau-Ponty viii).

If semiosis is the process and 'effects of the production and reproduction, reception and circulation of meaning in all forms, used by all kinds of agent of communication' (Hodge and Kress 261) and if it must happen in relation to semiotic space (Lotman 123-25) then space ceases to be empty, 'dumb space' revealing the environment itself as 'a bearer of intelligence' or at least of potential meaning (Sofia 182). In her article on container technologies, Zoë Sofia notes that containers contain space (Sofia). Yet, this space is not just empty or dumb space but smart space which contains a stockpile of standing reserve which may be used if and when it is called upon (Sofia) This argument is based around Heidegger's notion of enframing, or the essence of technology, which treats the world as standing reserve (Heidegger). Crucial to Heidegger's argument, in this instance, is that modern technology as a manifestation of enframing sets about ordering the world (Heidegger). That it contains in order to stockpile it in case it is needed in the future and in doing so, changes the way that beings may be in the world, making the modern technophile unable to be in the world in any other way than that as the orderer of the world (Sofia)

MySpace contains friends who are literally embedded in one's MySpace profile in cells, places and ranks that create 'complex spaces that are at once... functional and hierarchical' within a grid like matrix (Foucault 148). These friends are the standing reserve which can be called upon to promote the bands' music, to attend shows and generally to be there in case they can be mobilised to the cause. Friends in MySpace in what, some have suggested, is typical high school style are hierarchically organised into a top eight, sixteen or twenty. These friends are featured on the profile page while the rest are relegated to a link. Frenzal Rhomb's official profile, for instance, is managed by twenty year old Martin ("Martyisjesus Myspace") from Perth - not the Marty referred to in the foregoing quote, who is Varial's drummer ("Marty Drums Myspace"). Consequently, Frenzal's top eight friends, in order, are: Martin, Varial,

Scotty (Varial's lead guitarist and singer), Useless I.D. (another punk band), Blue Murder Touring Company, someone called Ashley, Fat Wreck Cords (a record label) and Front End Loader, who are another band ("The Official Frenzal Rhomb Myspace Profile").

In cahoots with Martin, Frenzal ran a promotion on their MySpace which gave people the opportunity to become one of their top eight friends which was an excellent exercise in cross promotion. To be in the running to become one of the revered top eight, visitors to the Frenzal page were redirected to the Varial page and asked to figure out the lyrics of the chorus of one of their songs. This established 'a hierarchy of knowledge' the criteria of which are tested and must be met before promotion to top friend will be made (Foucault 146)

Another unsigned Perth band which, despite having only been gigging since August 2005 has enjoyed a modicum of success is, Something More. Describing themselves as 'Five dudes, one Thrashy Fast, Melodic Hardcore band from Perth', Something More became members of MySpace in August 2006 and already have had two thousand one hundred and fifteen profile views, generating two hundred and one friends ("The Official Something More Myspace Profile"). With a friends list which boasts local and national bands like Miles Away, Break Even, Alleged, Avalore, From the Ruins, 50 Lions, Carpathian, I Killed the Prom Queen, Parkway Drive, Hope After the End, Namesake, Extortion, Hitman and Varial and more, music promoters Annihilate Music and music stores 78 Records and Music Finder, Something More are, according to the comments they've received and the shows they have played and have booked, headed for big things ("The Official Something More Myspace Profile"). While Something More have not been gigging for very long, their members are well established within the Perth punk scene, with at least one of them, Marty Drums, having been involved in the scene, both as a performer and promoter for approximately five years, they have used the contacts which they have made, both on MySpace and at live shows, to help kick start them. Already clocking up shows with big local and interstate bands,

Something More have not had to spend a cent on advertising, yet have been able to keep their fans/friends informed of their progress which culminated in the anxiously awaited recording of a demo in September 2006.

While both Varial and Something More have been able to exact some success from their MySpace pages, the networking capacity of MySpace should not be overestimated. Varial had already established themselves as an up-and-coming band in Perth, having made many contacts in the industry while Something More, being scene kids and established musicians had a built in fan base before they even started playing. Therefore, as Lawrence Lessig notes, 'the Internet is a network of networks', which facilitates an important 'innovation commons', paradoxically created a free space of innovation within the parameters of this facilitating microenvironment (Lessig 55).

Morse suggests that 'interactivity is a kind of "suture" between ourselves and our machines' (Morse 16). While the term interactivity is problematic in Merleau-Pontian terms, the non-indifference of our involvement in MySpace, and the political anatomy of discipline in engaging the hardware are significant in relation to our understanding of the world including our own position within it. An important point on which Foucault and Merleau-Ponty share some common ground is the significance of time, space and movement in the emergence of the subject. Thus Morse argues that

Post-television machines are charged with the production of 'dequotive I' and hence, with the full range of subjectivity in cultural transmission (Morse 5)

Hence the ontological play on words in the name, MySpace.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in their book *Metaphors We Live By* argue that the range of spatial and orientations, and ontological metaphors we use are grounded in the body.

Quite clearly, we use spatial models to 'locate' ourselves within MySpace. As

Gripsrud comments (citing Lakoff's and Johnson's text)

Spatial or 'orientation' metaphors are the most common of all which presumably has to do with the fact that mental mapping is 'grounded' I

fundamental bodily experiences [our perception of back, from, beside etc].
Spatial metaphors arise 'from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we
have and that they function as they do in our physical environment'
(Gripsrud 119) (Lakoff and Johnson 14)

The expressions of 'virtual space' and 'telepresence' which are also largely effects of spatial, orientation, and ontological metaphors grounded in the body are applied to a range of technologies and phenomenon which create an illusion of presence-at-a-distance. Consequently it is used in this context to describe MySpace in terms of its ability to open up interactive yet virtual environments in which humans may exercise agency.

To become a present and potent member of MySpace it is necessary to engage the technology itself, on one level or another, even if this is merely to turn the device on or off or to type. The profiler must assume a certain orientation towards the technology and the program to facilitate engagement. Inhabiting MySpace often entails adopting certain 'ideal' postures, for example with a desktop computer, we must sit in an upright position facing the screen with our fingertips poised for action over the keyboard, privileging the eyes and hands in a metonymic relationship to the rest of the body. In Merleau-Pontian terms, through habitual engagement with the keyboard/screen ensemble we may incorporate them into our corporeal schemas (Weiss). That is, the computer becomes a part of our embodied agency, not something that can be put apart from what we essentially are (Taylor 3). Therefore, MySpace becomes another space of equal epistemological and ontological standing to others: the lounge room space and MySpace are equally significant, requiring a movement from the physical body to the technobody (Ihde Bodies in Technology). This movement is nothing out of the ordinary for the participants in this research, having been habitually incorporated into their corporealities. For this reason, tele-technologies offer various corporealist tropes, such as the synecdochal 'all-hands-and-eyes' experience of inhabiting MySpace through the medium of a desktop computer.

Each required action must be performed in sequence that with repetition and regularity establishes a sort of 'anatomy-chronological schema of behaviour' (Foucault 152). By disciplining our bodies, posture and gestures, whether they be as simple as sitting facing the computer screen and pressing the keys or as complex as navigating several 'profiles' simultaneously our bodies enter into a political anatomy. This anatomy is one of both constraint, due to certain bodily imperatives, and enablement due to the 'mastery' of knowledge and skills necessary to become a powerful agent in MySpace.

As in any discursive structure however, there are always opportunities to adopt alternative orientations to, and actions within, the virtual space that opens up between the profiler and the keyboard/screen ensemble. As in other discourses, there is also a potential for counter discursive practices 'built in' to its structure. For example, it is entirely possible to adopt alternative identities, with interests, family information, photos and even names and ages open to manipulation. It is also possible to adopt multiple personae on MySpace, where identities can be tried on for effect, merely by obtaining another email address.

MySpace is, in the first instance, a highly controlled space, bound by the rules of engagement, the binary logic of the computer, and the historical conditions of its formation (McHoul and Grace).. It is a system, bearing with it certain concepts, methods and instruments from previous discursive models, for example television, the telephone and typography. The computer and the program set out in advance the rules necessary to gain membership to this specific discourse. In order to inhabit MySpace one must learn these rules of engagement. Simply to turn on the computer, connect to the internet, log in and be admitted to MySpace represents an achievement of discipline.

Control, or at least direct involvement with(in) virtual spaces(s) may thus offer us the illusion of omnipresence while simultaneously constraining and enabling possibilities to be potent and present agents in the material and physical world of consequence. It

is then possible to suggest that these worlds, the other people within them, and the technology itself, concern MySpacers as potential fields for agency.

For Merleau-Ponty, time space and movement structure and are structured by embodiment, which imposes point of view or perspective, constituting the world as it is 'for me.' Foucault's discipline on the other hand argues that techniques of knowledge and power, that partition time, space and movement, influence the shape the world may take, according to local and specific bodies of knowledge.

As Merleau-Ponty notes that the world 'is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions (Merleau-Ponty xi) As such, the world itself is the 'pre-existent Logos' (Merleau-Ponty xx). Perception is the foundation of all the ways of having a world (Taylor). To consider, reflect, theorise or perform any other activity, including 'mental' or verbal activity, is predicated on embodied perception and our having/being a body. Thus 'perception of the world is essentially that of an embodied agent, engaged with, or at grips with the world' (Taylor). Thus, we need to come to an understanding of space not only as spatial relations and the distance between the elements of the world but as a socially produced *order of difference* (Shields, 2006: 149). That is, we need to understand spatialisation and how it is achieved through everyday practices and rituals (149).

In 21st century it is no longer possible to consider space in dichotomous terms like Australia/unAustralia, which formed the basis of our understandings of the world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Telepresencing technologies have literally made it possible for us to be physically situated in Australia, interacting with distant others in unAustralia. One's body in MySpace is often largely inert save for quick and repetitive, predominantly finger and eye movement in order to interact with other inhabitants. It has been recurrently argued that the teleological ideal of virtual space is all about the ultimate option of our bodies, or reaching an existential state where the body is not necessary (Richardson and Harper). At the very least, we have achieved a

reduction of some aspects of the body to fingers and eyes and simultaneously an ocularcentric amplification of the eyes (Ihde Technics and Praxis). Yet the corporeality of virtual space never disappears. We are, and remain embodied beings in unAustralia.

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