Title

Panel Review: "Cyberlicious with a Byte"

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Publication Date

2009-03-01

Cyberlicious with a Byte

As the title of this panel suggests, these papers largely dealt with the strong and often playful effect of cybernetics and cyberspace on the ways we conceive of gendered and queer bodies. It is also fitting that the title uses the slightly dated term "cyber" instead of "new media" or "digital," as James Hixon started the panel with a paper on the genealogy of information studies and its continual focus on its relationship to the body. Titled "Bodies Into Bits: A Reparative Approach to Informationalizing the Body," Hixon's paper discussed such luminaries as Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver, and Katherine Hayles, with the main thrust of his argument addressing the works of Gille Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, as Hixon eloquently described, Deleuze and Guattari break down some of the central issues of digital culture and embodiment through an exploration of the similarities between the natural body and information. Hixon's discussion focused on the "body without organs," a phrase used to describe the virtual dimensions of the body. Deleuze and Guattari point out that people are made up of an endless number of virtual personae and possibilities, and by performing these different personae, we are actively experimenting with different ways of representing ourselves. This pre-digital idea is particularly resonant with both the age of the avatar, and the queer body—a body that actively investigates its own potentialities—a body without organs. As such, Hixon helpfully pointed out that digital media often encourages people to rethink and reform their bodies and subjectivities as bodies without organs.

Hixon's presentation flowed well into Jennifer Kavetsky's "There's No Crying in WoW: Gender and the Gaze in *World of Warcraft*," a paper on how gender is figured into the creation and choosing of avatars in this extremely popular male-dominated online game. While digital media may encourage one to actively play with one's identity, there are still limits to exploring alternative personae. For example, statistics show that few men choose to play a woman in the game, and most women choose to play a male character. Mostly through interviews with players, Kavetsky presented a number of possibilities for why this might be the case. She found that women often do not want to have to deal with sexism or gender issues while playing the game. On the other hand, those men who choose to have their avatars be curvy females often do so specifically because they want to look at something "pleasant" (that is, sexually stimulating) as they play. In her research, Kavestsky also interestingly found that males who created female avatars were more often than not adolescent boys playing the game for the first time, and if they begin to play the game more seriously, they often cast aside their female avatars for ones which look more serious (that is, manly). As a result, these beautiful female avatars are often castigated in high-level and end-game raiding as these particular aesthetic decisions are a marker of players who

are not serious game players. While there are many ways to design an avatar's appearance, Kavetsky importantly points out that many of these choices depend on gender. Without an obvious way to make a queer avatar in the game, the identity roles available are greatly reduced. To compound matters, while the female avatars have obvious feminine physical characteristics, such as a large bust and often an hour-glass frame, the male characters are for the most part very boxy, with only their giant arm muscles giving away their hyper-masculinities. The avatars' gendered characteristics simply repeat the sexist ideology that while men are supposed to be active and powerful, women (and their avatar/cyber analogs) are still structured as only being useful as (cyberlicious) eye candy.

In contrast to *World of Warcraft*, Danielle Hidalgo and Tracy Royce outlined their research on CrashPadSeries.com, an lgbtq porn website, in their paper, "Fluid Sexualities and Blurred GenderLines?: Mapping Sex, Sexuality and Gender in Online Queer Pornography." This website includes photos, videos, and an ongoing episodic porn series which features a plethora of sexual practices and pleasures. The site actively puts itself in contrast to other lesbian and gay porn sites, which feature straight porn actors who are only showing off alternative sexualities for an implied male audience's pleasure. The people on this site are supposedly not "real actors" and all identity themselves as queer. These people are as interested in pleasuring themselves and experiencing their queer sexualities as they are in giving a queer spectator pleasure. Hidalgo and Royce focused on an episode featuring Shawn and Jiz, two people whom the site refers to as "authentically queer." In a behind the scenes interview, a female actor expresses a great deal of excitement when learning that they will be shooting a male on female sex scene, an experience she has never had before. This raises serious questions about what a capitalist or commodified queerness looks like. The utopian value of Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs" gets inverted in such scenarios when queerness becomes not just about being many different things at once, but also about being *as* many

different things as you possibly can at once. The actors in CrashPadSeries.com treat queer performativity as a competition; while they all seem to be queer, some are perhaps more queer than others. Ultimately, there seems to be a desire to become the *most* queer person of all.

After the panel, moderator Victoria Vesna, a professor in the Department of Design and Media Arts at UCLA, asked the panel, and specifically Hixon, how they thought Deleuze and Guattari's model of queerness might be best expressed in a digital space. This question prompted a lively debate, and the idea of using the morphing body/avatar to explore and express digital hybrid identities was thought of as having potential promise. With the body constantly in flux and morphing from one image to another, this digital body could be seen as an aesthetic expression of a queer performativity—a performativitity that is always potentially present within the realm of the virtual and the cyber.

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