SECOND LIFE: MESSAGE (TO PROFESSIONALS), ATTENTION! ECONOMIC BUBBLE (TO THE REST OF US)

Bjarke Liboriussen

Follow on *Twitter!* (popular since ca. 2010)

Friend on *Facebook!* (popular since ca. 2008)

Find us in *Second Life!* (popular ca. 2006)

All three invitations above are based on connectivity in general. Even though the pronoun *us* might be used in them, such invitations seldom point out exactly what the recipient is to follow (a brand, a band, a programme?), befriend (a political party, a community, a person?) or find (a product, a cause, a new lifestyle?). Such details are left to the person whose attention has been grabbed.

In many cases, the recipient is not required or expected to fill out the blanks. The point of the invitation might very well be the invitation in itself; that is, sending a signal that yet another medium has been mastered by the sender. Marshall McLuhan famously held that 'The medium is the message' (McLuhan, 2003), but if the invitee never really uses the medium, the medium cannot affect the recipient's perceptual system. Hence the medium is effectively neither medium nor message but merely content – i.e. what is being communicated, employed strategically to generate attention in other media.

During our research on innovative uses of virtual worlds in architectural practices, it often seemed true that 'The medium is the content'. The most striking example was the strategy employed by Starwood (the company behind hotel chains such as Westin and Sheraton) in drawing attention to their hip sub-brand, Aloft (formerly aLoft). One of the strategies for branding Aloft hotels as happening, hi-tech places is making extensive use of a wide range of

the most current forms of social media (see Lanz *et al.*, 2010). Back in 2006, this included Second Life, a virtual world which at the time was attracting widespread attention in the mainstream media. It was even suggested that Second Life offered a glimpse of a new, 3D version of the World Wide Web.

Before the Aloft sub-brand was launched, in the physical sense of opening its (actual, real life) doors, Aloft acquired a Second Life island and used it as virtual building site for a model of the first hotel (a project carried out by one of our interviewees). It was reported that Aloft let potential customers try out the Second Life model and subsequently fine-tuned spatial layouts on the basis of the user feedback (e.g. Jana, 2006). Readers of that story did not have to go to Second Life to talk or think about it. There is a parallel here to Andy Warhol's eight hour long *Empire* (1964), which consists of a single long take showing the Empire State Building. Nobody has ever seen the film (at least not the whole thing), but that has never stopped anyone from talking about it, thereby nurturing the film's meaning – or maybe rather 'inflating the film's meaning'.

As with other economies, economies of attention and meaning have their bubbles. If attention corresponds to sales and meaning to price, too much attention was generated at an inflated meaning, as a result of which the Second Life bubble burst. (The bubble of attention, that is. Many actual Second Life users, as opposed to journalists and other commentators, have carried on with their everyday second lives of community building, role-playing, graphic design, entrepreneurship etc.)

Although Second Life could no longer be used as content in strategic invitations to communicate, the bubble did have a real impact on architects and other professional designers of spaces. Second Life raised questions as to the potential of virtual worlds in architectural practices: How can we engage citizens in urban planning or exhibition design? How can we sell homes to our customers? How can we attract investors to renovation projects? How can we work together with engineers in new ways? Some of these questions are already being answered by 3D tools developed specifically for the architectural profession, but virtual worlds highlight the possibilities of social interaction and embodiment (by having an avatar) in digital, 3D spaces.

In all the cases mentioned above, the introduction of virtual worlds alters the relationships between actors (architects, engineers, clients,

citizens, etc.) in socio-technical networks. In those cases, the medium really is the message – and not just content.

The poster included in this special issue of *Culture Machine* documents our first step in using the concept of *technicity* to understand the changing relationships between actors. We have taken a further step with a recent article (Liboriussen and Plesner, 2011).

References

Jana, R. (2006) 'Starwood Hotels Explore Second Life First', *BusinessWeek* (now *Bloomberg Business*).

Lanz, L., Fischhof, B. and Lee, R. (2010) *How Are Hotels Embracing Social Media in 2010? Examples of How to Begin Engaging.* New York: HVS Sales & Marketing Services.

Liboriussen, B. and Plesner, U. (2011) 'Imagining Technicities: ICT Taste and Skill as Elements in the Configuration of Virtual Worlds Architecture', *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 9 (2): 81-94.

McLuhan, M. (2003) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* Corte Madera: Ginko Press.