Digital Borderlands: Cultural Studies of Identity and Interactivity on the Internet. 

The terrain staked out in this 2002 collection by five members of the Digital Borderlands Research Project is not new to Internet scholars. However, issues of on-line identity and representation, and their relationship to “real life,” are viewed with fresh eyes. Unlike most edited collections, there are only five chapters: the first, “Into Digital Borderlands,” is a comprehensive co-written review of the broad field of “Internet studies” from a cultural studies perspective. The other four are ethnographic case studies or textual analyzes with primary titles designed to give the book a sense of coherence: “Cyberlove,” “Cyberbodies,” “Cyberzines,” and “Cyberglobality.” Although all contain interesting observations, the scholarship is uneven. The collection ends on a high note with a postscript by renowned Internet scholar Steve Jones on the state of Internet studies in the academy.

Johan Fornäs and his team deftly synthesize and theorize a range of concepts associated with “digital borderlands.” They reject the terms “new” or “digital” media, which suggest a demarcation from older/other forms of media in favour of a framework that acknowledges complexity and continuity. “Borderland” carries with it a sense of not only a free space produced between two established categories but also ones of struggle and overlap (p. 2). This approach allows them to dismantle the problematic binary logic (“either/or”; “good/bad”; “real/virtual”) that pervaded discussions of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the mid 1990s. Rather than heralding a “second media age,” for instance, Fornäs et. al. speak of “the blurred distinction … between mass media and interpersonal media” (p. 25, emphasis in the original). Much of this critical work has been done already, but the broad scope of the discussion—digitality, Internet arenas, productive reception, hypertext, interactivity, and virtuality are but a few subjects—make it of particular value to non-specialist communications scholars, graduate students, and upper-level undergraduates. The “borderlands” of the field of study—cultural/communication/media/Internet—not just the object of study, are addressed as well. Even for those scholars who read and write in this area, the opening chapter is interesting because the authors do not simply deconstruct dichotomies but consider them “liminal case[s] of a much more complex continuum” (p. 26). They argue that cybercultural studies can work “retroactively,” renewing an interest in, for example the telephone as an interactive technology. They also do some retroactive work, linking virtuality to art and “human culture from its very beginning” (p. 30).

As for the cybercultural studies, the strongest chapter is Jenny Sundén’s “Cyberbodies: Writing Gender in Digital Self-Presentations.” It is based on the two years she spent researching the social MUD (multi-user domain) WaterMOO. The extensive background she provides and discussion of issues of (dis)embodiment in cyberspace will be of most interest to those unfamiliar with this on-line forum of interaction. The originality of her work lies in its focus. Instead of interaction, she analyzes the descriptions that the participants provide of their characters and situates these as textual performance. The range of identifications she discusses is much broader than what is flagged in the title, and indeed, she needed to work through these identifications in a more systematic manner to make her argument more effective. Sundén begins with “Raechel,” whom she sees as defying the “hyperfemininity” found on the better known LambdaMOO. Two male characters (not necessarily the gender of the authors/performers), Lithium and Rosencrantz, are then discussed in terms of class and intertextuality (Metallica lyrics and Shakespeare, respectively). She does come back to gender, positing the descriptions of the male characters as more “realistic” (“real” rightfully understood here as a discourse) and therefore functioning as a norm against which the female characters, with their more “poetic” and/or
playful descriptions, are marked as deviant. Those who refuse gender and opt for “spivak” characters that use pronouns like “e” and “em” are the most deviant and rare: out of the 163 descriptions she analyzed, only 12 were “other.”

“Cyberlove: Creating Romantic Relationships on the Net” is an ethnographic study conducted with 14 heterosexual Swedish men and women who used Web chat rooms for the reason stated in the title. Malin Sveningsson neatly tracks the progression from chatting online to telephone calls to “real life” meetings. ICTs do not transform dating or relationships but rather provide a meeting “venue” that transcends the limits of location and time and provides more control to participants in divulging personal information. The author notes discrepancies in the data: the participants all emphasized that they were not looking for a romantic relationship in the chat rooms yet they also said that once they established a relationship, the amount of time they spent in chats decreased or ended. The problem with this article is not a lack of theorizing, but that it does not approach its subject from a cultural studies perspective. (I do not count the work of Goffman as cultural studies.) Hence, ideological constructs like “love” and “romance” are not interrogated; neither is the critical observation that the men placed far more emphasis than the women on the appearance of the person they were about to meet face to face.

The other two chapters are less satisfying. “Cyberzines: Irony and Parody as Strategies in a Feminist Sphere” contains some interesting observations about “grrlzines” such as Bust, Riotgrl, and Geekgrl, but its lack of an organizational structure compromises the argument. Martina Ladendorf provides an outline of her analysis in her introduction but then discards it, jumping back and forth between zines and introducing new ones in “themes” that are not well thought out as analytical categories. The main weakness is the inconsistent/inaccurate use of feminist theory. On the one hand, Ladendorf embraces “grrly feminism,” in which combining army boots with fishnets is seen as parodic (a nod to Judith Butler), and dismisses as outdated second-wave feminism the questioning of its political efficacy. Yet a few pages later, she praises “Feed the Supermodel,” a parodic/ironic exercise that could have appeared in Ms. magazine in 1972. The final chapter, “Cyberglocality: Presenting World Wide Relations,” has an intriguing title but its exclusive focus on the United Nation’s Web sites will likely disappoint readers who are not UN enthusiasts. To be fair, Kajsa Klein does gesture to the politics of inclusion/exclusion as well as representation—the “choice” to include a children’s puzzle of an African girl to be “assembled”; the complaint of delegates about the relative position of their flags. Rather than seeing these as systemic problems with the UN, the author offers up facile solutions such as more financial resources and personnel to “improve” the design of the sites.

In short, Digital Borderlands as a whole makes for compelling if not always satisfactory reading for any scholar or student interested in the “borderland” of cultural/communication/media/Internet studies.

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