

Unfair Visualisation in a Contemporary Virtual Environment: The Racial Gaze in Yahoo! Mail's Animated Log-in Avatars

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Abstract: As one of globalisation's technologies, the use of the Internet has brought diverse peoples, cultures, ideas and opportunities together in one global virtual environment. However, since technology is a matter of capital, the processes by which virtual environments are visualised and created are often far removed from the spatial, social and economic vicinities of several categories of end-users. And, because creative ideas are necessarily cultural, the visualisation process of virtual environments is also subject to dynamic social mechanisms inherent in the society within which the visual process takes place. In the end, there are evident possibilities for unconscious transfers of subtle discriminatory ideas to the virtual space. Using Yahoo! Mail's animated sign-in avatars, this study shows how subtle racial gazes have filtered into the visualisation process of the contemporary virtual environment.

Key words: Yahoo! Mail, visualisation, virtual environment, racial gaze

INTRODUCTION

At an Interdisciplinary Lecture held at the University of Zürich on Thursday December 1, 2005, a contributor from the audience attempted to exhibit his brilliant understanding of the disparity in racial intelligence. Using a technological analogy he said that 'blacks' have analogue brains while 'whites' have digital versions of the human grey matter. To understand this speaker, we might consider that analogue is an 'outdated' and much less efficient technology than digital-as a CRT monitor differs from a digital flat screen. The Zürich speaker aimed to illustrate the African/Western intellectual difference with the incompatible divergences in the efficiencies of analogue and digital technologies. This profound idea sent shockwaves through the audience. But one of the speakers, Till Förster (2005) quickly made it clear that there was no such technical difference between the brain structures/functions of whites and blacks.

At the Leads University, Frank Ellis, a lecturer in Russian and Slavonic Studies declared to students how ethnicity and race "influence average intelligence", claiming that blacks have genetically lower IQs than whites (Racism, 2006). In the colonial period, overt statements like these, which racialise knowledge and human capacities, enabled the speakers and like-minded audiences to measure themselves against groups they "defined as largely worthless and ineffectual"

(Roediger, 1991). Perceiving, defining and visualising others as ineffectual and less intelligent enabled individuals to boost their own morale and gain self-worth. But the age of colonisation has given way to that of globalisation where cultural politics has become more subtle and racial gazes more sublime. In this age of globalisation where technologies, ideas and ideologies move with people (Appadurai, 1996) at fast speeds into actual and virtual environments, is there a possibility for old racial gazes to filter into newer technological contexts? Are the processes of visualisation in the contemporary virtual environment free of the old racial gaze? It is in this context that this study takes a close look at the virtual log-in environment of Yahoo! Mail.

Logging-in to Yahoo! Mail: Yahoo! Mail is one among several free web-based email providers with millions of subscribers spread across the globe. Each subscriber is required to have a name and password with which to log-in. For many in developing countries, email is a major reason for using the Internet because it connects them with friends, family and loved ones living in diverse places in the world. Apart from sending/receiving emails, subscribers can also use messenger for real-time chats in the virtual space. The Internet has definitely brought diverse peoples, ideas and opportunities together in one global virtual environment. Services like Yahoo! Mail are however driven by extensive capital and global

technology-affordable by rich Western interests. Nonetheless email services like Yahoo! Mail are heavily patronised by millions of people in poor Southern countries. However, since control over technology and its contents is a matter of capital, the processes by which virtual environments are visualised and created are often far removed from the spatial, social and economic vicinities of several categories of end-users. Thus end-users of Internet services in poorer non-western countries are excluded from vital creative processes of development and visualisation of virtual environments like Yahoo! Mail. The ideas of people in poor/developing countries are not necessarily taken into consideration in the design of virtual environments. For, globalisation and technology are hinged upon capital, which developing societies do not have. And, because creative ideas are necessarily cultural, the visualisation process of virtual environments is also subject to dynamic social mechanisms inherent in the society within which the visual process takes place. In the end, it becomes very easy for web artists based in the West to subconsciously appropriate negative gazes in developing, visualising and representing ideas and information about racial others. It is this problematic that one confronts in Yahoo! Mail's animated log-in avatars.

Yahoo! Mail's animated log-in avatars: Over the past several months Yahoo! Mail has provided animated log-in avatars, changed every once-in-a-while, for its subscribers to view. As users log-in to the service and wait for their email accounts to load, these avatars display in the window. All the avatars are more or less the same bespectacled individual dressed in costumes that reflect identifiable identities of the racial stock character being portrayed. We shall take some examples.

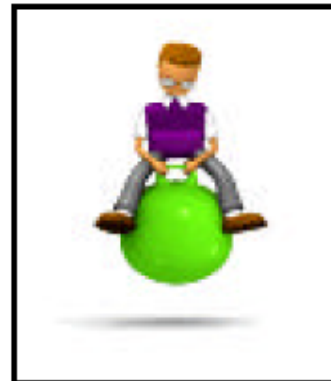
Yahoo_ostrich: This avatar is simply a "Western" individual running to keep a safe distance from a pursuing ostrich that wants to strike him.



Shadow boxer: This essentially 'global' (and therefore "Western") avatar wears boxing gloves and a trunk. As he boxes rhythmically his shadow boxes along too.



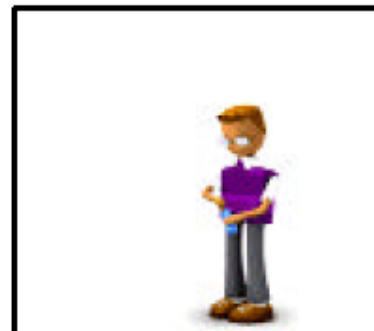
Yahoo ball jumper: The ball jumper avatar is a "Western" character ball-jumping on a green ball.



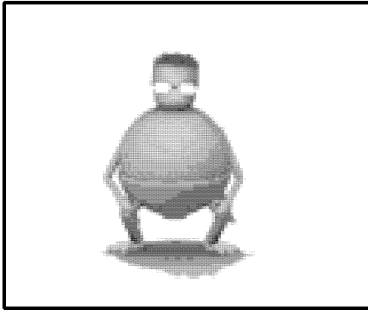
Yahoo breakdance: This is an avatar doing an aerobic break-dance move. As a racial marker, 'break-dance' tends to identify the avatar as a Black-American character.



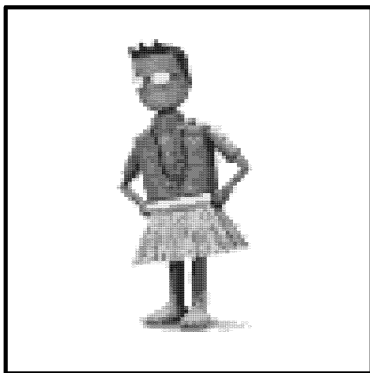
Yahoo heart bubbles: This ostensibly "Western" avatar keeps busy by blowing heart bubbles.



Yahoo sumo: This avatar is cast in the “Asian” frame, doing a Sumo Wrestling move.



Hula_liam: This avatar came into display on Yahoo! Mail towards the end of March 2007. It is cast in the “ethnic” or “African-extracted” frame, wearing a shirt, neck beads and a raffia skirt. The avatar stands at a spot and shakes his head continuously, from side to side.



DISCUSSION

The racial gaze in Yahoo! Mail’s animated log-in avatars: Although these avatars are used in the virtual environment, they are cultural products of visualisation. Insofar as they are cultural products, they are bound to reflect the social dynamics and inconsistencies of the contemporary global world. A cursory look at these avatars reveals some of these inconsistencies. The avatars in 1-6 are all engaged in activities that can be broadly classified as follows:

Productive: The avatars in 1-6 are ‘productive’ because they are engaged in activities that are wholesome, purposeful, satisfying and result-oriented like sports, recreation and survival (running from the ostrich).

Intelligent: The avatars in 1-6 are ‘intelligent’ because they are engaged in actions that require strategic calculation and deliberate reasoning.

Contemporary: The avatars in 1-6 are all engaged in activities that are more-or-less contemporary and generally acceptable in global social practices.

These three key elements of avatars 1-6 above are clearly absent from avatar 7 (Hula_liam). This avatar merely stands on one spot shaking his head from side to side in a non-productive, unintelligent, seemingly purposeless and non-contemporary manner. At best Hula_liam’s actions seem impulsive and meaningless—much the way an excited monkey will shake its head in a zoo’s cage. In the end, the sociological analysis of Yahoo! Mail’s animated log-in avatars tends to indicate a very subtle racial prejudice that goes almost un-noticed. There are four clear racial stock characters indicated in the visualisation of these avatars: the Westerner, the Black-American, the Asian and the African-extracted. Of these racialised characters, it is clearly Hula_liam, the African-extracted, that is most unfairly visualised in the frame of racial unintelligence.

What is important about this type of racial gaze in visualisation is that it is a subtle and possibly unintended infiltration from the unspoken layers of public memory. It illuminates the racial undercurrents that lurk deep in contemporary social life, only to surface at certain moments in global spaces. The racial message in Yahoo! Mail’s animated log-in avatars is not different from the opinions of the men in Zürich and Leads. It is only the medium and the environment that are different: Whereas Zürich and Leads incidents happened in the actual environment, Yahoo!’s gaze enacts in the virtual. Both ways, the gaze is unfair because it mis-brands and places limitations on people by racialising human capacities. This racial unfairness is similar to what Leo Frobenius once read in The Berlin Newspaper: The magazine declared that ‘Black Africa’ is poor in recorded history because it does not have a “higher standard of culture” (Idowu, 1973). This notion called ‘Blackness’ into question by linking it with degeneration and unintelligence. In other words, by default, people of African-extraction were unintelligent and uncreative in the ‘actual world’. Many years later, this same sentiment has surfaced, subtly, in the contemporary virtual world of Yahoo! Mail—even if unintended.

CONCLUSION

By presenting its range of animated log-in avatars in racial stock characters and by visualising its African-extracted avatar within a visual ambience of unproductiveness and unintelligence, Yahoo! Mail reloads an old racial gaze. This gaze is negative, unfair and prejudicial because it tends to ratify ‘virtual’ racism and feeds Yahoo!’s global audiences with untrue cultural

difference. Perhaps Yahoo!'s hula_liam is a fleeting reference to the hula-dance of the Hawaiian people. Even then, the visualised gesture is not positive because it does not seem to capture the intelligent and mythological depth of the Hawaiian performance. Clearly, as Cole (2001) suggests, "how a gesture is enacted often conveys far more meaning than what the ostensible content of the gesture may signify". Therefore, visualising a racialised avatar in unintelligent and unproductive circumstances signifies that the racial stock is unintelligent and unproductive. And, by draping its avatar with the negative 'ethnic' African-extracted image, Yahoo!'s visualisation can be compared to blackface in American minstrelsy. In blackface, Western performers painted their faces 'black' in a ridiculing visualisation process. Blackface was essentially a racial maker deployed by pro-slavery white persons to practice racism and racial politics (Mahar, 1999; Meer, 2005). What made "the American minstrel show so racist was that blackness and African-American culture became the equivocal signifiers for ignorance, disorder and the grotesque" (Cole, 2001). In Yahoo!'s avatar, blackness and African-extracted culture are unwittingly visualised as equivocal signifiers of unintelligence and contemporary un-productivity. What is most important is for today's virtual environment visualisers and visualisation processes to consciously sideline negative and defunct racial gazes. The virtual environment is as important today as the actual world. For, people meet more often in virtual spaces that they do in the actual world. And in order to foster a

wholesome virtual world where race is not a limitation and cultural difference does not translate into discrimination, virtual environments need to be kept free of subtle visual racism.

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