Virtual Worlds Research: Global X Local Agendas

By Gilson Schwartz, Dept. of Film, Radio and TV, School of Communication and Arts, University of São Paulo

This is a brief essay, we call "think-pieces", designed to stimulate a discussion on a particular topic. For this series of essays we propose the following question:

"Consumer behavior in virtual worlds, is it really any different to the real world, or is it simply a case of 'old wine in a new bottle'?"

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As a frequent traveler attending numerous symposia, workshops, and conferences on the theme of virtual worlds, I feel a growing uneasiness with the marked differences of perception, approach, and agendas between global conferences and local Brazilian scene. After all, as one of the former European colonies, it should be natural to expect a continuous convergence between research programs.

This is not the case and a sign of these differences can be obtained by a very simple exercise in comparing the mapping of themes and frameworks observed at the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) 9.0 conference, held last October in Copenhagen, and the Brazilian Cyberstudies Association (ABCiber) conference, held this November in São Paulo. These are probably two of the most comprehensive and prestigious gatherings of scholars, students, and research fellows focusing on a variety of digital culture issues, although one should of course refrain from believing these conferences are the most representative, relevant, or well-attended. A more extensive investigation of research agendas focusing on digital culture throughout the world would certainly clarify the problem. This is just a "provocatory" (provocative + introductory) note.

A preliminary remark is also needed concerning the different approaches of these two academic conferences. While the AoIR elects a major theme for its annual encounters, the ABCiber is a more open attempt at collecting the most active research results in Brazil. This leads to a more organized profile and to a certain emphasis in the overall program at the AoIR meeting. The AoIR is almost three times the size of the ABCiber annual meeting, so we will focus on the relative weight of different issues and keywords in their respective programs.

In general terms, the Brazilian agenda has a more theoretical twist, judging from paper titles and keywords. The Brazilian academic production, as presented in these conferences, was much more focused on case studies and empirical reports (both quantitative and qualitative) at the AoIR gathering, while about 40% of the papers presented at the ABCiber meeting were theoretical, philosophical, or literary accounts of the emerging digital culture. My papers also follow this pattern—a case study for AoIR and a conceptual essay for ABCiber. It is also noticeable that while the internet researchers' association is now holding its ninth conference, the Brazilian Asssociation of Cyberculture Researchers is only holding its second.[1]

Some remarkable differences arise from this very simple exercise. Papers related to or mentioning the keywords "networking" or "social network" comprehended 15.6% of the AoIR

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[1] The complete collection of papers and presenters is online at: AoIR 9.0: Rethinking Place, Rethinking Community - http://conferences.aoir.org/Final_Programme_-_October_6_2008.pdf and ABCiber – Brazilian Association of Cyberculture Researchers -http://www.cencib.org/simposioABCiber/programa.htm#programa.

program, while only 8% in the Brazilian conference. Social networking platforms are also clearly more frequent at the AoIR conference as a result of the conference call for "rethinking community." The "wiki" phenomenon, however, is totally absent in the Brazilian program, while 1.4% (5 papers) take this platform as an object for research at the AoIR program. In relative terms, however, other platforms are equally represented in the research agenda of both events, such as YouTube (about 1%) and gaming (8% in Brazil, 10% at the global AoIR).

Surprisingly, "virtual worlds," "avatars," and "Second Life" are equally represented at both events (about 3% of the papers)—a result that tells us something about the importance of the 3D web as well as its potential for academic research, especially in Brazil, where broadband access is still a privilege for few lucky people (although many expected an Orkut-like explosion of SL to take place over the last couple of years in Brazil). The weight of "identity" related papers is also approximately equal in both events (at 3% in Brazil and 4,2% at the AoIR conference).

Some differences, however, are striking. Gender issues, for instance, are very scarce at the Brazilian gathering (about 1%), while always strong at the AoIR over the years (4.5% in 2008, although they have performed more strongly in the past). Another telling difference is the weight of journalism and education at the Brazilian meeting (12% in Brazil against 2.8% at the AoIR conference). This is clearly an outcome of the demographics of the ABCiber community, since educators and journalists are among the most frequent graduate students in cyberculture programs in Brazil, whereas the AoIR profile is clearly more varied. This is also a reflection of internet access in Brazil, which is pronounced in the media organizations as well as in schools whereas in the First World the web has already become a much more pervasive phenomenon.

A similar reasoning applies to city studies, since part of the academic community in Brazil is strongly attached to public entities such as digital inclusion programs, telecenters and other public telecommunication policies. The keyword "public," however, is totally off of the radar at the ABCiber program, while the AoIR has 3.4% (12 papers) discussing the emergence of a public sphere and related issues.

Lastly, there was a shocking difference in the importance of digital mobility and cell phone usage as a subject for academic research, with only 3 papers at the ABCiber conference (2%), while the AoIR 9.0 collected as much as 19 papers on issues related to mobile culture (5.3%).

It would be premature to draw harsh conclusions from this "provocatory" exercise, however it is important to note the similarities and differences. An emerging interest in virtual worlds and the 3D experience is a surprising outlook, whereas the scarce interest in mobile digital culture is problematic in Brazil, given that the country has over 130 million users. This is a clear sign of "decoupling" between the Brazilian academic community priorities and the real life of internet and virtual world citizens in the country. I would even say that the Brazilian academic community has been surprised by the emergence of the cell phone boom, lagging behind the phenomenon except for a few pioneers.

Even though these numbers are a preliminary result of a highly personal account, I hope they will serve the purpose of fostering a transcultural evaluation of research agendas in our societies.

Appendix 1: Themes and Keywords – ABCiber and AoIR 9.0

	ABCiber		AoIR 9.0	
Orkut	5	3%	1	0,3%
Virtual Worlds, Avatars and Second Life	4	3%	13	3,6%
Gender	1	1%	16	4,5%
Journalism	9	6%	7	2,0%
Blogs	6	4%	20	5,6%
Network, Social Network, Networking	12	8%	56	15,6%
Education	9	6%	3	0,8%
Local (Place)	2	1%	33	9,2%
Religion	2	1%	10	2,8%
City	8	5%	7	2,0%
YouTube	1	1%	4	1,1%
Identity	4	3%	15	4,2%
Wikis	0	0%	5	1,4%
Public	0	0%	12	3,4%
Cinema	4	3%	2	0,6%
Games	12	8%	36	10,1%
Cellphones, Mobility	3	2%	19	5,3%
Papers Presented	148		358	