Chapter 16
Embodied Digital Rhetoric:
Soft Selves, Plastic Presence, and the Nonfiction Narrative

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ABSTRACT

A new embodied digital rhetoric emerges when using nonfiction narratives built in fully immersive virtual reality systems that take advantage of the plasticity of our sensations of presence. The feeling of "being-in-the-world" as described by phenomenologists, including philosophy of mind, film, and virtual reality theorists, is part of the adaptability that humans show in their relationship to technological tools. Andy Clark's "soft selves" and our "plastic presence" merge as the high resolution graphics of the latest virtual reality goggles and robust audio captured at real events tricks our minds into having an embodied connection with the stories portrayed in these new spaces. By putting people into news or documentary pieces on scene as themselves, opportunities for persuasive and effective rhetoric arise. This chapter cites theory, psychology and virtual reality research as well as the author's specific case studies to detail the potential for this new embodied digital rhetoric that allows us to pass through the screen and become present as witnesses to a nonfiction story.

Where does the body end and the mind begin?" young Quastro asked, amid recurring attempts to fine-tune the differences between real and virtual violence. "Is not the mind a part of the body?" "In MOO, the body IS the mind," offered HerkieCosmo gamely, and not at all implausibly, demonstrating the ease with which very knotty metaphysical conundrums come undone in VR (A Rape In Cyberspace, Dibbell (1993))

INTRODUCTION

I have a memory of complete immersion: I was in fourth grade and, as often occurred, I had completed the assignment before my classmates. While I waited for the other children to finish, I sat on top of my book and secretly read by moving my legs aside to reveal the pages. Turning a page was slightly problematic and usually led to discovery if my teacher, Mrs. Wolfe, hadn't already noticed that I had stopped paying attention. That kind of getting in trouble was worth it, however, especially if the book was good and the alternative was boredom.

That year I was particularly fond of a novel called *Mountain Pony*, which I had picked up with my family at a thrift store. It didn't matter that I had probably already read it half a dozen times. At the moment when the protagonist and his pony are trying to cross a treacherous mountainside in the pouring rain, I was always transported deeply into the story. The sense of my physical body would disappear. While I remember little else from that year, when the annoyed Mrs. Wolfe snarled at me to hand over my book, the sensation of looking up to see sunshine pouring through the Southern California schoolroom windows instead of gnashing thunder clouds spewing crazy lightening was completely disorienting. Where was I again? Oh, yes, here. And in trouble.

Several decades later in 2007, a female-gendered avatar in the online virtual world of Second Life threatened to hit me with a baseball bat. Her avatar was completely green, wearing ice skates and dressed in an outfit resembling a jumpsuit, with long sharp points emerging from her clothes. Of course she couldn't really hit or hurt me, but as she slapped her hand with a virtual bat and expressed her anger over my use of Second Life, I felt extremely intimidated.

Her male-gendered avatar partner had just gone through the "experience" associated with *Gone Gitmo,* a digital recreation of Guantànamo Bay prison I built with artist Peggy Weil. The site

was designed so that after entering a model of a C-17 transport plane, and then touching an orange panel, one's avatar would be bound in white straps and a "black hood" would drop over the "vision" of the now disabled avatar. The experience was carefully constructed using source material, including photographs leaked by soldiers, which revealed how detainees were transported to the prison (Figure 1).

The virtual "black hood" was created from video in which the camera lens was covered with black fabric that allowed only flickers of light to filter through and was intended to play as the POV of a hooded individual. Soldiers' voices, detainees' cries and jet noises were later added as the soundtrack. Once the video began, it would fill the entire screen of a participant's computer, taking away control, and when it finished – an equivalent of the hood being "removed" – the individual would then find s/he had been transported from the plane to the interior of a virtual replica of the notorious Camp X-Ray cage. Inside the cage, the body of the avatar appeared bound in shackles, a startling feeling for participants, albeit the restraints were merely visual and the avatar could actually move about freely.

The green bat-wielding avatar was put on the defensive after seeing her companion jailed in the virtual X-Ray cage even though he quickly stood up and walked around. As she began to dialogue, I directed her to the embedded videos depicting treatment of detainees at the prison camp. (Initially released by the US Department of Defense, these videos were quickly retracted due to international outcry over the inhumane conditions they revealed.) However, the images did nothing to lessen her outrage focused at me. The more she felt the site "defended" the detainees, the angrier she became.

Clearly, the experience of the virtual construct communicated something inherently upsetting to her. Equally important, the slapping of the baseball bat felt physically threatening to me, despite the fact that I was only viewing a three-inch digital

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