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Second Life and Cyber-Activism

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I have always been more than a bit skeptical about cyber-protests and virtual demonstrations. Among other things, it does not seem to me that virtual contention is very, well, *contentious*. Nor does it seem that participants will gain the same sort of emotional and other solidarity benefits sometimes associated with physical activism. Further, insofar as intended audiences are concerned, cyber-protests seem even easier to ignore than most <u>"meatspace"</u> [1] protests. Who is the intended target of the contention? Where is the disruption? The volume? The effect of waves of people massing in one space to vent frustrations and demand change? As ineffective as the "meatspace" protest can often be, these and other physical elements seem at least to increase the chances that participants and audiences will be affected by the experience.

Perhaps, though, I have been undervaluing protests that occur in spaces like Second Life. The image is from a recent <u>Free Burma event</u> [2], which featured a <u>"human chain"</u> [3] in which 500 people from 20 countries joined, as well as vigils and meditations in support of this cause. (Thanks to my colleague Chris Borgen for bringing this to my attention.) Admittedly, this was not an enormous protest. But I am more interested in the possibilities generally than in this one example. The avatars seem to add a form of physicality and personality to such events. The contention looks similar to physical activism — at least insofar as there are "people" assembled in "places" waving placards and listening to speakers. A participant can tell who she is standing next to and with. The organizer can assemble mulltitudes quickly — as the human chain shows, even across continents. The audience problems remain, of course — how do protesters ensure that intended listeners and viewers experience them? Can they interfere in some way with everyday Second Life functions? Can they invade spaces in which others do not wish them to be?

Rather than replace real-space activism, perhaps this sort of cyber-activism will lead to greater social and political activism in existing "meatspace." As one commenter to the Free Burma event reflected:

> So what is it with virtual worlds, that made me join now? Was it the fact someone on my friend-list made me aware of the demonstration and asked me to join? So did the social network [do] what it was supposed to? Was it the fact that [the] request might have been triggered by the media attention regarding Burma? Could it be just the ease of access that made me join? So did it just provided me a way to compensate for being lazy not going out and make an effort in real life? And if that is true, is that a good or bad thing? I think the fact I joined by itself was good. The confrontation with my non-participation in real life made me think, and I guess that is good too since it might even change my social behavior in real life for the better.

I would be interested to hear from any Second Life inhabitants who have been involved in this sort of activism. What motivated your participation? What were your own impressions of the experience? Will it likely have any effect on how or whether you participate in such events in "meatspace"? I would be interested to hear from those who are skeptics as well — of cyber-activism of this form, or without regard to the type of space.

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[1] "meatspace": **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meatspace**
[2] Free Burma event: **http://www.ugotrade.com/2007/09/29/second-life-demos-for-peace-justice-in-burma/**
[3] "human chain": **http://viviennecassavetesblog.vox.com/**