

## **Baudrillard and the Virtual Cow: Simulation Games and Citizen Participation**

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### **1 The Development of Citizen Relationship Management**

We have defined three modes of local citizenship management using ICTs (Michel 2005). In ‘e-administration’, the citizen is considered a ‘consumer of rights’ claiming personalized and efficient public services. ‘E-government’ reflects a vision of a relatively passive citizen-agent who responds to his duties. In ‘e-governance’, the citizen is considered an active agent of local democracy. (See Table 1 below.)

When trying to promote this kind of participation in public debate (‘e-governance’), public organizations face persuasion challenges. Participation requires both motivation and perceived capacity. Simulators may thus prove to be efficient communication channels by providing both, leading in turn to a higher elaboration likelihood of the message content (Petty and Cacioppo 1984).

	<b>E-administration</b>	<b>E-government</b>	<b>E-governance</b>
<b>French Republican principle</b>	Government for the people	Government of the people	Government by the people
<b>Citizenship's component</b>	Rights	Duties	Participation
<b>Role given to the citizen</b>	Consumer	'Passive' agent	Actor 'Active' agent
<b>Underlying logic</b>	Delivering services, improving satisfaction of citizens	Improving the chance of a policy's success	Encouraging deliberation, participation
<b>Role of local elected</b>	Improving administration performance	Understanding the opinion of the citizens using consultation	Protecting free expression,
<b>Corresponding ICTs tools</b>	Online administrative services	Electronic consultation	Collaborative tools Simulation games?

Table 1. Three types Citizen Relationship Management using ICTs

## 2 Entering the Vacheland World

Every day, more than 490,000 people visit Vacheland ('cow country') to take care of their virtual cow.<sup>1</sup> Vacheland, originally developed by the Poitou-Charentes regional council in France, is a unique simulation game focusing on agricultural issues and designed as a communication tool for citizens. Agriculture is a key asset to economic development for this region. Has playing Vacheland changed anything about players' attitudes towards farming? To address this question, an exploratory study was conducted through forum analysis, exploratory interviews, and 'netnography' (Kozinets 2002).

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.vacheland.com> (last accessed September 16, 2008).

Participating in Vacheland could be considered an example of a significant modern ritual, a quest for authenticity (Cohen 1979; Pretes 1995; Corrigan 1997). Participants might then experience the game less as a way of learning about 'real' agricultural conditions and more as what Rheingold (1993) calls 'hyperreality'. For Rheingold, 'hyperrealists' see the use of ICT as a route to the total replacement of the natural world and the social order with a technologically mediated world. The experience of hyperreality is a quest for the lost reality of a more authentic life (Corrigan 1997). For hyperrealists, reality and authenticity are located elsewhere, in another, healthier historical period, culture, or lifestyle (MacCannell 1976).

### 3 Results and Questions

Vacheland players seem to seek two different types of recreated authenticity, consistent with Baudrillard's (1981) framework on simulation and simulacra. For some people Vacheland is related to something that once existed, or still exists, or is perceived as having existed once, such as one's past or childhood, with a strong nostalgic dimension. It can therefore be interpreted as simulation, a symbolic representation of reality. For other players, the references underlying Vacheland are already fictional. Vacheland can then be interpreted as a form of simulacrum: 'I come from the city. I know very little about the countryside and agriculture. It is mostly from movies (e.g., *Babe*), television shows, or books (e.g., *Animal Farm*)'.

Vacheland is seen as a potentially powerful tool to raise people's awareness about agriculture, but it has not significantly changed players' attitudes. Virtual farming does not interfere with their real consumption. The connection between virtual breeding and consumer behavior is strongly symbolic; it applies mostly to gadgets related to the animals. Thus, for the question 'Can we use simulation games as a tool to help build political opinion and change citizens' behavior?' the results seem ambivalent. On the one hand, simulated phenomena could be a way to re-enchant political life (Ritzer 1999). On the other hand, this could lead to a 'disneylandisation' of political life, in keeping with the 'society of spectacle' described by Debord (1967).

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