THE ECONOMY OF THE GIFT AND THE CONCEPT OF THE VIRTUAL

Phil writes

This is an interesting concept – the virtual gift. [Link to slashdot]

Digitus1337 writes “Wired has an article up about a new online service known as ‘FunHi.’ You sign up and join a community, and give your fellows gifts, but as Wired has reported, ‘these are not ordinary gifts. They’re purely digital: little flashing icons of cars, planes, diamond rings and other virtual representations of expensive items included in messages members send each other. And FunHi members don’t seem to care that the real money they’re spending on the gifts, at prices as high as $30 an item, is going straight into the company’s coffers.” This leaves just one question unanswered… why didn’t I think of this?” It sounds like an April Fool’s Joke, but then, so does online trading of Everquest loot.

Marcel Mauss revolutionized our thinking on the general economy with his concept of the gift –

Mauss's most influential work is his Essay sur le don (1923-24; English translation: The Gift. Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies, 1954), a comparative essay on gift-giving and exchange in "primitive" societies. On the basis of empirical examples from a wide range of societies, Mauss describes the obligations attendent on gift-giving: the obligation to give gifts (by giving, one shows oneself as generous, and thus as deserving of respect), the obligation to receive them (by receiving the gift, one shows respect to the giver, and concommittantly proves one's own generocity), and the obligation to return the gift (thus demonstrating that one's honor is – at least – equivalent to that of the original giver). Gift-giving is thus steeped in morality, and by giving, receiving and returning gifts, a moral bond between the persons exchanging gifts. At the same time, Mauss emphasizes the competitive and strategic aspect of gift-giving: by giving more than one's competitors, one lays claim to greater respect than them, and gift-giving contests (such as the famous North-West Coast Native American potlatch), are thus common in the ethnographic record. In this work, Mauss thus lays the foundation for a theoretical understanding of the

nature of social relations.

The objects and services exchanged in “primitive” gift-giving are, as Mauss points out, thus laden with “power” (the Polynesian words mana and hau are used to refer to this “power in the gift”). Though a similar “power” is present to a certain extent in modern gifts as well, Mauss shows that gifts in traditional societies are more complex and multivalent than anything we know from modern society. The gift, as Mauss sees it, is more than a simple commodity or memento changing hands – it is a “total prestation” (préstation totale), which metonymically (as part for whole) stands for every aspect of the society it is part of. The gift is economic, political, kinship-oriented, legal, mythological, religious, magical, practical, personal and social. By moving such an object through the social landscape, the gift-giver so to speak rearranges the fabric of sociality – and it is this that forms the basis of the gift’s power.

(I got this from AnthroBase.com.)

When is a gift anything other than virtual? – that is, the gift always invokes obligation, reciprocation, relationship – mingling materiality and immateriality. This is a far better way of thinking about the virtual than through ideas of faithful representation and mimicry/mimesis.