

The Swarm

Jade is always on the move. She stays at her boyfriend's once or twice a week and at her best friend's apartment in the city after they go out which is at least once a week. Often, she has late lectures in which case she stays with one of her university friends.

Jade is not a planner. With the exception of university lectures and her Saturday job at the pharmacy, her life is very much unstructured. Furthermore, Jade's friends are not planners either. They go about their lives in ways that may seem to previous generations to be totally unconnected to each other. They have no central meeting place where they hang out – like the mall, or the main street or the family house. They rarely plan ahead to meet; rather, through the use of mobile phones, arrangements are made on a minute-by-minute basis.

Because of her mobile technology Jade is able to move between groups of people and activities with ease and fluidity.

It's 4pm on a Friday afternoon. Jade has finished her last lecture for the day. She gets on the tram at Melbourne University and heads into the city. She gets her mobile device out of her bag and logs into her virtual lounge room.

Her lounge room is a 'virtual home' that resides in the owner's mobile phone. It is always on. It serves as the first point of contact for anyone getting in touch with the owner of the phone.

The first thing Jade sees is that a note has been left by her best friend Sarah who must have visited the virtual lounge room while Jade was in a lecture. Sarah would have been met by an avatar of Jade sitting in a lecture theatre. Jade clicks on the note and an avatar of Sarah in a business suit pops up. Just by looking at the avatar Jade is able to determine that Sarah must still be at work. However, the avatar is also embedded with a specific message for Jade which advises her that Sarah is finishing work early and wants to catch up with Jade in the city. Jade, who is about to get off the tram at Collins St., clicks on her avatar menu and selects one that depicts her carrying boutique shopping bags. She attaches a voice tag, "In Collins St, meet you here as soon as you can get away from work."

She instructs her 'shopping' avatar to notify Sarah of her activity and the avatar of Jade with boutique shopping bags appears in Sarah's virtual lounge room. Meanwhile, not wanting to be disturbed by anyone else while she is shopping, nor alert her boyfriend and parents to the fact that she is out spending money, she decides to leave her 'in a lecture avatar' activated for everyone else but Sarah. She instructs her mobile device to screen all calls according to the avatar profiles she has set up, puts the mobile device back in her bag, gets off the tram and heads for the stores.

The virtual lounge room supports multiple avatars that represent the user's multiple identities. They do not have to represent what the user is doing, but rather, what the user wants others to think they are doing.

Twenty minutes later she is in a shoe shop and her phone rings. She knows that unless it is an emergency, in which case avatar profiles can be overridden, it must be Sarah as every other visitor would be subjected to the ‘in a lecture’ scenario and know not to call. Sarah is two minutes away and they meet up and spend a happy, uninterrupted hour shopping. Sarah, who has left work early, has left her avatar on ‘in a meeting mode’ so she is not disturbed by calls either.

Note that the ability to not be contacted is as important as the ability to be contacted. This level of control over virtual space is at the center of this technology.

At six-o-clock, the two friends go to an up-market bar for a drink. Both girls take their mobile devices out of their bags and log into their respective virtual lounge rooms. Jade sees that while she has been shopping or rather ‘in a lecture’ three friends have visited her. They have all left notes which she clicks on and their avatars appear. The friends are happy that it is Friday and want to catch up. She quickly goes to her avatar menu and selects one of her with a martini glass. She makes this her universal avatar so that everyone that comes to her virtual lounge will see this scenario.

The label ‘avatar’ is a term that is embedded in gaming culture and one that pops up frequently in popular culture. Avatars are not taken literally but rather allow for an iconic representation of what the user is doing at the time. For example, the use of the martini glass to indicate that one is ‘out on the town’.

She also notifies specific friends who she really wants to see by sending the avatar of her with a martini glass to their virtual lounge rooms. She attaches the voice tag “At Amber Lounge with Sarah. Here until about ten. Come down.”

The use of avatars can be proactive and when the owner of the phone wants to actively engage a person or group of people they can choose the appropriate avatar from their avatar menu list and send it to wait in the relevant persons’ virtual lounge rooms. The avatars serve as notifications. The virtual world controls the real world.

Both girls order a snack and a drink and leave their mobile devices on in front of them on the table. Not only are they engrossed in a conversation with each other but also are aware of the comings and goings in their virtual lounge rooms. Assorted friends drop in both in real life and virtually. Jade has a quick video conversation with a group of friends in London and touches base virtually with her parents. She meets her boyfriend in his virtual café and they exchange virtual kisses. In real life he is still at work.

This phone facilitates both real life and virtual contact amongst friends and supports the seamless transition between the two.

Jade uses the picture and video options on her phone to put ‘up to the minute pictures’ on the ‘walls’ of her virtual lounge room.

The owner of the phone is able to customize the look of their virtual lounge room and make it reflect a continual digital representation of the user’s real life. This can act as



an incentive for those not there to join her (or perhaps to not join her) or to allow those who cannot be there to 'get the picture'.

And so the night continues...

End of scenario