Multi-me

How our lives have become intertwined with digital realities

The concept of 'cyberspace', originally invented by William Gibson and first used in his short story *Burning Chrome* (1982), has become a term most people born in the late 20th century have become quite familiar with. Originally a term which

'describe[s] his [Gibson's] *fictional computer-generated virtual reality in which the information wealth of a future corporate society is represented as an abstract space',*

the word 'is also used in very general terms to cover any sense of digitally generated 'space', from the World Wide Web to virtual reality'.[1] Today, being 'in' cyberspace can be seen as an equivalent of being 'online', in one way or another. Even though (computer generated) virtual reality (in terms of a 'simulated reality') is for some a stage in technological development we have yet to reach, for others, this virtual reality has become 'real' and their most prominent reality.[2] Most people experience some form of virtual reality on a daily basis, for example while checking in with their OV-chipcards, paying with their credit-/ or debit cards, or when checking up on your 'friends' posts on Facebook, Twitter or any other social media.[3] However, there are also people, as is the case in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, who live (most of) their everyday lives in cyberspace.[4] These people have the idea that their existence in 'cyberspace' is more valuable, meaningful or significant than their existence in 'the real world'.

A perfect example of people who live in this manner is given in the documentary *Life 2.0,* in which a filmmaker named Jason Spingarn-Koff, follows the lives of a group of people who have completely devoted themselves to their online lives in the fictional world of *Second Life.*[5] One woman in this documentary has even been able to make a living out of her activities in *Second Life.* This woman*,* Asri Falcone is a so-called 'content-creator' in *Second-Life*, which means she designs 'stuff' people can buy for their characters and

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[1] Lister et al. 2009, p. 421.

[2] Lister et al. 2009, p. 430.

[3] A little elaboration on the VR-traits of these examples: in the case of the OV-chipcard 'you' have checked in, while in fact only a digital version of 'you' (when the card is personified) has checked in. This digital version of 'you' has nothing to do with the 'real' you, but then again, what is 'real' these days. When paying with cards, the 'actual' money, in terms of the coins and bills one can touch and see, never exchanges owners. You digitally hand over your digital money to another digital account of some other (digital) person or entity. This digital money doesn't really 'exist' anywhere. The money is just a set of numbers to which we accredit a certain, also fictional, value. Of course, this is also the case with 'real' money, which is essentially just fancy paper.

[4] Gibson 1984.

[5] The movie *Life 2.0* was directed by Jason Spingarn-Koff and released in 2011. The VR-environment *Second Life* first went online in 2003 and has been growing ever since. It is often referred to as a 'game', but it is more of a meeting place where people can talk, hang out and perform certain activities (together), like dancing, swimming or just 'living' in a (digital) house. The platform has no purpose and is therefore not really a game, even though entertaining stuff can be done which can be considered 'fun' and 'game-like'. The filmmaker follows certain individuals in this game by contacting them *in game*, meaning that the filmmaker himself has made a character or avatar to 'play' with in the game and started talking to fellow members of the *Second Life* community. The movie features in game video-material as well as 'real' video material of the (real) people behind these virtual characters.

their homes in the virtual community, such as clothes, tables or complete houses. She herself finds that 'Asri' is a mirror-image of herself and not some invented character through which she is role-playing. She states that: "Asri is not my alter-ego, Asri is me."[6] She feels as though the character on screen and *in-game* is the real her; she truly lives inside this game *for real*.   And why shouldn't this be true or real? As the spokesperson of *Second Life* tells us: "things are real because they're there with us and we believe in them."[7] *Second Life* is the ultimate simulacrum, a perfect *hyperreal* surrounding, in which reality is not so much distorted, but superseded.[8]

The fact that *Second Life* is a simulation and not a representation of reality, doesn't mean that the people or rather, characters who 'live' in it aren't real. As a matter of fact, 'a simulation can be experienced as if it were real, even when no corresponding thing exists outside of the simulation itself'.[9] Whether we can never find out if the person behind the avatar lives in Oregon or Ohio, or even exists at all, doesn't change the fact that this avatar in *Second Life* is 'doing stuff'. It moves, it can talk, it even has a voice.[10] Some of the avatars used in *Second Life* may resemble the 'real' person behind it, as is the case with 'Amie Goode' and her (secret and online) boyfriend 'Bluntly Berblinger', who's story is firstly portrayed in the documentary, while others can be completely 'made up', as is the case with another person portrayed in the documentary who plays as eleven year-old girl in *Second Life*. The online avatars experience emotions and activities of their own that are also, circumstantially, also experienced by the user at home behind their desk.

Nevertheless, the documentary portrays a strange overlap between the digital and the non-digital or 'real' world. Asri, for example, makes 'real' money (if such a thing exists, but let's assume it does) for her efforts and sales in the digital world. Amie and Bluntley fall in love 'online' with each-other('s avatar), even though they have never physically met before and both quit their previous marriages to be together. When they finally do meet 'in real life' they greet and kiss each-other as if they were long lost lovers, while in fact, it's the first time they've seen each-other's 'real' body and face.

This goes to show that the way in which we think about what is 'real' and what is 'not-real' or 'fake' isn't that easy to determine anymore. In this day and age when people are constantly online, live their lives (partly) digitally and look more at screens than at other people's faces, perhaps the definition of the real should be widened. Perhaps there is not one 'you' or 'me', but are there multiple 'me's' that I can 'play out' and multiple 'you's' that I can meet and interact with. I'd say we live in a multi-reality, in which different realities (co-)exist and different 'ego's' of ourselves live simultaneously. In this multi-real world, the 'original' cyberspace world of the matrix as it is portrayed in *Neuromancer,* seems almost old-fashioned.

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6 Falcone, Asri, *Life 2.0*, 12:15.

7 Roedale, Philip, *Life 2.0*, 10:26.

8 Lister et al. 2009, p. 423-424.

9 Lister et al. 2009, p. 428.

10 Users can use the microphones on their computers to talk to other people/avatars with actual human voices, although users can also alter the output of their microphones to alter their (real!) voice.

Literature

Gibson, William, *Neuromancer*, Ace Books New York 1984.

Lister, Martin, John Dovey, Seth Giddings, Iain Grant and Kieran Kelly, *New Media, a critical introduction second edition*, Routledge London and New York 2009.

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