What's the Meaning of Second Life?

Not too long ago I was riding the subway downtown, when a group of four young teens got on the train. With obvious intention they chose to sit directly across from the doors opening onto the platform. As we sped away from the station I could see by their body language that they were readying themselves for something. Pulling into the next station, they looked eagerly at the doors, expectantly leaning forward. The instant the doors opened, all but one sprang from their seats, rushing past people getting on, across the platform, to slap a hand against the station wall. Then just as quickly they jumped back on the train before the doors closed and left without them.

When I was younger I also played games like this for fun and to test my limits, however theirs had a twist. As I mentioned, one of the teens stayed in the train while the others ran out. And while it may seem that he was missing out on the fun, he was in fact the most integral part of it. Each time the other boys ran out, he held up his cell phone and digitally video recorded their journey.

As the train entered each station, this performance was repeated over and over. What began to strike me was not that they were receiving pleasure from this game, but how. Before each round trip I could see the tension and laughter building. As they ran, they grinned widely, obviously enjoying themselves. But the point of the game and really the source of pleasure came once they were safely in their seats.

Huddled together around the tiny 2-inch screen of the phone, they howled with laughter as they watched digital versions of themselves, avatars, barely ten seconds old, run for it. Amazingly, it seemed they gained more pleasure from the recorded media than they did from performing the actual act; reliving through the cell phone, what only moments before had actually happened. Here before me was the new media generation at play. Raised surrounded by computers from an early age, they know almost instinctually how to use interactive media as a way to extend part of themselves into a virtual world. As a result they are more able to cross the boundary between the actual and the virtual. These recordings were

simultaneously them and not them. Allowing for the detachment of watching a Youtube video, while at the same time staying personally connected. For me, the fact that they purposely created recordings and apparently found more pleasure in them than in the real act was highly symbolic of an evolving contemporary relationship to digital media.

Sitting there on the train, I begin to understand the way in which our response to media is evolving, I got a glimpse into what I saw happening between people and their avatars in Second Life.

Through out history, from the first cave wall paintings, to today's digital media, the image has always contained an alternate reality. Looking activates the mind's ability to perceive and imagine, transforming images into both virtual worlds and avatars. Any picture is a two-way door allowing travel from both directions. We, as avatar enter the virtual world of the picture, and the picture enters our world. We cross this border many times a day, most times without noticing. And yet each time we do it changes our lives.

I should stop here to define a few words in the context of this paper. First, I define the world in which we are now as the Actual World. I define Virtual World and Online World as worlds created using technology and use them interchangeably. I use Digital Media and New Media interchangeably to describe computer-based platforms for transporting and disseminating information. Within New Media, is Interactive Media, covering all forms of Digital Media communication. Inworld is a flexible term, which I use to refer to cyberspace or virtual worlds.

For as long as electronic communication has existed so too have avatars and the virtual spaces in which they live. In early digital and analog communication like phone calls, videoconference, or email the virtual space where contacts are made exists in real time and only as long as the parties are using the system. During contact the communicating parties share aspects of themselves through

intonation, what they choose to talk about, etc. By what is shared in virtual space a sense of the other person begins to develop. The longer the dialog the more close to the actual person the sense is. However what each party is interacting with is an avatar of the other person and is not truly them. Once the conversation ends, so does the virtual space and the avatar, which were birthed inside of that specific communication.

A second, newer form of the virtual world exists as Blogs, or as networking sites like Facebook, Friendster, or Twitter. In these examples we create avatars and place them online within a provided virtual architecture. In this case the avatars created exist in real-time and do not disappear when the user is off-line. Instead they can be described as being in a frozen state. For example, while Facebook users are at the computer interacting with their pages, the page is their avatar - existing in real-time. Communication is possible via instant messaging and by updating aspects of themselves, making the page current and living in the present. However, once the user logs off, even with the ability to auto-update, these avatars continue on but become more like a photographic portrait frozen in the past.

In the last decade with the emergence of true online worlds, connections are made in virtual spaces, which do not rely on the individuals to exist. World of Warcraft is an example of this third type of online world; one which exists whether or not an individual player has logged off. In fact WoW continues regardless if every player logged off at once, because of its permanence, and non-reliance on individuals to manifest it into reality. Online worlds have truly become a reality onto themselves

To better understand how it is that the human mind relates to avatars and virtual worlds in Digital Media, let's start by looking at the work of two pioneers. Professors Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass of Stanford University developed a series of experiments exploring the human response to media. Their research proved that how our brains respond to the actual and the virtual world is no different.

When we sit down to watch a movie, we know that we are about to experience a recording. However once we press play, our emotions and reactions are so easily aroused by the information we see on the screen that with in the first second our mind accepts the information in front of us as real. Transported seamlessly into a virtual world by the video, we never notice that we have crossed the border. Very rarely do we sit self-aware in front of the video watching ourselves watching, experiencing the video as only pixels on a screen. And it is in fact very difficult to do so. The science behind this is simple.

The human brain can be divided into two sections that deal with interpreting experience. These sections have been described as the "new" brain and the "old" brain. The mind can use logic and experience to determine that the image on the screen is not real and uses the "new" brain to do so. An example of this is when you remind yourself that the frightening monster on the screen is just part of a movie to alleviate the real fear being felt. Although we can rationalize our emotions, we are unable to turn them off.

Our "old" brain will always instinctually respond to what is happening on the screen as if it were real. It is a prehistoric remnant from days when heightened responses to the things we saw were deeply hardwired in for survival. Thankfully so, as we still use this wiring everyday to safely navigate our world. For example, we instantly respond to the visual cues and associated arousal to jump out of the way of a speeding car. Yet because our old brain only responds in one way to what we see, we also jump at a video recording of a car as it speeds towards us on a computer screen. This fact that we jump at an image of a car was the first indication to Reeves and Nass that digital media is more than just pixels.

The key is in perception. The fact that we perceive the image of the car first as if it were real, and act on that perception, connects it to reality. It is not that images in media are the same as what they depict in the actual world. But since the perception of something can alter behavior or cause action shows that images in digital media are real to us first and made unreal only through thought.

Both still and moving images are virtual worlds. They were made as landscapes for contemplation, consumption, or for memory. To be visited visually, even if as it turns out that as we cross back over the border into the actual world we track out some virtual stuff on our shoes.

But what of virtual worlds that are built to be autonomous worlds? Places where many aspects of the actual world are mirrored. Places where we are invited to enter and live. And what happens when we do?

If through perception, images affect our daily lives, allowing aspects of them to come out of the screen into our world. What effects does placing ourselves into the screen have on our life?

This is exactly what Nick Yee, an online games and immersive virtual reality scientist at the Palo Alto Research Center, wondered. Beginning with the notion that an avatar is not as much an outfit to be worn, as it is a self-representation, he formulated a theory, which he called "the Proteus Effect". His original experiment consisted of two parts: The first placed a subject in the body of an avatar that was considered beautiful. Second, in an avatar that was tall. These above average avatars then interacted with people represented by average avatars. All the subjects were first shown how they appeared in a virtual mirror so that they could establish what they looked like to the other participants.

He found that when the beautiful avatars interacted with the average ones, they tended to be much more extraverted and friendly and thus were perceived as more interesting, fun and subsequently gained power. The tall test subjects were given money and asked to make a choice on how to divide it between themselves and the other avatar of average height. In this case the taller avatars tended to keep slightly more for themselves without disagreement from the average participants.

Yee discovered that our perception of ourselves is deeply and directly linked to our avatars. When we see ourselves as attractive online, we immediately begin to act as if the beauty was our own off-line. This leads to changed behavior and how we are perceived in both worlds. Yee also noticed

that these changes do not happen over a period of weeks or days, but in seconds.

This shift in my perception as an avatar and of those around me is exactly what I experienced when I first entered Second Life.

One reason I originally visited Second Life was to explore human attraction. I had heard how attractive the avatars were, and it seemed to me that they might be what I was looking for; a symbol for the desire of ideal body. At the time I was interested in how much of our culture is driven by a very specific kind of beauty: one, which is reserved for the young.

Printed media and television constantly reinforce our fears about ageing, having us worship youthful beauty. Through image manipulation and digital reconstruction in media we are given physical goals beyond what are humanly possible. We are meant to try to achieve the body perfection of gods and superheroes. So it only seemed logical that within digital media itself, in a virtual world unaffected by time, health, sun or gravity, I might find the purest form of our cult of youthful beauty.

This manifestation of a desire for unachievable physical perfection that I call the Superhero Complex is indeed what I found in Second Life. When given the option to choose how they appear Inworld, the overwhelming choice is a super-human body type. In Second Life many avatars look like variations of Ken and Barbie. However, it quickly becomes clear that their avatar's appearances are highly considered by their users. Each is unique, crafted with a personal idea of beauty in mind, an obvious individual. My interest shifted when I was surprised by the real emotions I felt towards them and I began to wonder more about what other connections existed between the Actual and Virtual worlds.

We know that our perception of ourselves in the actual world changes towards the positive when we inhabit an attractive avatar. What happens if all of a sudden we are able to have the culturally mandated ideal of physical perfection? Might a result be that these positive feelings about our actual selves, engendered by inhabiting our avatars, will eliminate some of the Superhero

Complex? From what I saw Inworld this appeared true. As soon as the pressures of appearance were relieved it seemed that in an ironic way people, as avatars were free to be more honest about who they are.

This ability to be honest in Second Life has resulted in many relationships on and off-line. Inworld research has shown that three quarters of people using MMOW (Massively Multiplayer Online Worlds) have made good friends, a third have found themselves more than casually attracted to another user through their avatar, half end up meeting in the Actual World, while a tenth end up in relationships online.

Avatar couples sitting together or holding hands are commonplace. Marriage on either side of the digital/actual border have happened after people met in Second Life and in some cases ended in divorce. And while the drivers of the avatars may have never met in the actual world the emotion they feel for each other through their avatars is far from unreal.

This paradoxical idea of freeing oneself to be more honest through partial anonymity seems to be one of the reasons that so many people stay once they have visited online worlds.

Those who first travel to online worlds go there for many reasons. Some visit casually as tourists having only trivial experiences, quickly forgotten. Others abandon their actual world for one online. Yet one of the primary reasons for all who venture Inworld is to be social.

Second Life provides a place where anyone can interact regardless of who they are. In Second Life gender and age are flexible. An avatar can be animal, vegetable, mineral or a combination of all of the above. You never know whom you are talking to when you begin a conversation with an avatar. The anonymity of Second Life encourages people to explore parts of themselves, good or bad. While sometimes this can lead down a negative road, the average response is to allow much of who the driver is to come through their avatar. Any emotional aspect that the user has difficulty with in their actual life can be

explored and pushed in Second Life. Those who are physically or mentally impaired find ways to live more freely Inworld. I have met a paralyzed person who goes to Second Life to dance. And know of Inworld therapy for the fear of heights; by climbing tall structures as an avatar the resident works towards overcoming his phobia.

Not surprisingly this can lead to problems of escapism. However most residents are not addicts but rather use Second Life to boost themselves up a bit, learn something, or just accentuate or add another facet to their personality.

Regardless of whether or not you purposefully visit online worlds, in contemporary life we all have avatars. Through our use of digital communication we create avatars sending them out as messengers, advocates or ambassadors of ourselves to make contact with other people. This constant travel into digital space continuously expands our presence throughout the world. Like the massive system of some forest mushroom, our on and offline personas spring from a giant organism that exists on two planes at once. Above ground is the Virtual World where digital extensions of our selves pop up all over, while below ground we exist physically in the Actual World.

These avatars have a variety of personalities, from manic text message to richly ornamented Blogs. In some cases we cover our avatars with images that act as symbols for aspects of ourselves. On a networking site like MySpace or Facebook, by posting our thoughts or quotes, music likes, or photos, we can choose to show very specific personal aspects of ourselves.

Years ago, I had a dream in which what you wore directly affected your emotions and personality: Checked red and blue socks give you an inclination to wonder. The cut of a white tee shirt indicated passions. A green silk sport-coat means self- absorption. The multi-colored combinations that you choose are who you become. When I think about how we can choose to express the parts of our personality with an online patchwork of imagery and information, I am reminded of this dream.

At the infancy of any new technology there are always mistrusting questioners, as there are enthusiastic disciples. Debates are inevitable and they will propose many ideas about the new realities created by technology. It seems that accepting the similarities, not the differences between the actual and the virtual is the first and highest hurdle to get over. Both are part of Real Life. Both are just perceptions of reality, experienced in our minds, and lived through emotion and time. Regardless of where we decide to place ourselves, at a TV, a window, a book, or a computer, an important step is to remember that time passes at the same rate. Virtual worlds are another place to experience, another part of a life to be lived if we choose. In the end this choice will allow for the acceptance of these virtual realities. Regardless of which side of the screen we live, as long as balance is maintained, contentment can be achieved.

  The experiences and perceptions we have while living shape who we are. Ultimately, what matters about our lives are those around us and the quality we bring to living.

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