

**PROCESSED IDENTITY. INDIVIDUALITY IN THE DIGITAL COLLECTIVE
UNCONSCIOUS**

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Abstract: The particular functionality of cyberspace and the increasingly significant inroads built by social media into the every-day reality of the present are shaping a perpetual transformation of the concept of identity. The present study examines the complex way in which the self is being constructed, metamorphosized and negotiated within a digital environment. With identity corroded by various cultural and social mechanisms, the textuality of the individual in the cyber-narrative of online communities is subjected to shifting definitions and (self-) contradictory illusions.

Keywords: identity, cyberspace, digital culture, social media, fragmentation

The current design of social reality is a multifaceted one, with social media being the shifting core of individual attempts to construct identity – online communities, from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram to 9gag have a complex impact on such attempts, since any member faces two rather conflictual desires: to be (or to be perceived, at least) as unique, and at the same time to be part of the community (thus integrating himself/ herself within the „communal” guidelines of expression). In a sense, this is comparable to what happens in advertising: you are shown a certain product together with images, symbols and representations of success in its most various forms. Eventually, you tend to associate the acquisition of that particular product with all the benefits (albeit artificial) associated with it in the commercial¹. The same algorithm is at play in constructing one’s identity in cyberspace – you basically try to promote your best-possible image, according to the criteria that are supposedly used by the others in evaluating likeability and casting interest. Because of the ever-changing trends, appearing and disappearing within the digital environment, the concept of stability is inherently negated, as far as identity is concerned. In a manner similar to companies addressing their customers through carefully devised commercial tactics, the digital self appeals or tries to appeal to the online community through a series of image-constructing mechanisms, tailored to suit the particularities of each medium and meet the demands of shifting trends. Gathering „likes” on Facebook or „upvotes” on 9gag could be interpreted as gaining momentum in promoting one’s identity, against the background of thousands of simultaneously expressed identities. In the case of advertising and consumer culture, H. Halton and J.D. Rumbo speak of allegedly unique constructions of selfhood as mere permutations of a „consumer-incorporated self”, biased by an entire array of marketing ideologies and affiliations, against a background of consumption practices displacing self-autonomy². Translated into the intricacies of promoting oneself – or one’s self – within a digital environment, this approach on defining identity would perceive the digital self as being the sum-total result of all potential influences on it, dismissing a coherent individuality and

¹Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1995

² Halton, Eugene and Rumbo, Joseph D., “Membrane of the Self: Marketing, Boundaries, and the Consumer-Incorporated Self”, in *Consumer Culture Theory*, edited by Russell W. Belk and John F. Sherry, Jr., JAI Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 298

stressing upon the multiplicities found inside a certain online community. Labeled in terms of postmodern utopianism, the attempt to elaborate and promote individual identity can be understood as the utopia-of-the-self, amidst the elusive mechanisms typical to contemporary social media.

The appearance of the Internet and virtual reality has provided a shift from a relatively stable, shared vision of utopia, to a remotely contextual, changing, even uncontrollable one. Digital environments are based on a phenomenon that mirrors the quasi-fetishization of the recipient of each text in postmodernity. Even though postmodernism also places a significant amount of stress upon the author as well, the focus shift from the writer – or the creator of any kind of text – to the “reader”, as the receiver of each (sub)textual message, the pronounced potentiality (from the part of the recipient) to alter or even to reproduce the message has been highlighted more than once. Individual and cultural contextualization adds active patterns of interaction as well, besides the mere possibility for multiple interpretations.

Internet users are not similar to the comparatively passive recipients in the case of literature or film. Even though the latter category can actively participate in decoding a certain message, in the case of digital environments they can also contribute to *producing* it. Their status is not the one regularly attributed to viewers, as they can modify the parameters, the very existence of the digital network; they are able to deliberately redefine it, to convey its “materiality” into various new versions of itself. It is no longer a matter of *relating* to a text, it becomes a matter of *being included* in it, of organically coexisting. However, the computer network acts as a pre-existing context, inherently influencing all interactions and establishing certain patterns of communication³.

Through constructing a new self and/ or by assuming multiple identities, the user is subconsciously trying to adjust reality, but instead of providing a basis for consistent change in the real, digital identities cause a significant discontinuity between the two alternate – and opposite – environments. The virtual world consequently becomes the best-case scenario for each and every possible desire, given the speed at which one can actually “construct” on-line. This digital fulfilment of needs is in a way minimalist, because its functionality is only valid within the limits of virtuality and exclusively according to the particular codes of each digital space, but concurrently it is potentially non-finite, as the actual amount of time that the user chooses to spend „inside” his/ her personalized utopia can easily exceed the one spent in the real.

Communication and extracting meaning are also strictly tied to the specific rules of one environment; even though some elements may be “universally” valid, thus able to transgress the (virtual) boundaries between different digital spaces, most of them are communicational and logical representations of user’s views, independently, free from foreign influences. Moreover, even within the same environment, meaning is shifting, signs are interchangeable, and the only palpable continuity is the one provided by the user’s complete freedom in programming his/ her own digital identity. Any unwanted feature can quickly become disposable, everything can be replaced or deleted without consequences. The functionality of the computer-generated utopia is based on a strategic assemblage of features meant to perfectly fit *every user’s* vision; the digital embodiment of the newly crystallized utopian perfection is basically a pastiche of everything that is seemingly unattainable in real life, with the added possibility of continuous evolution. Whether the user’s perspective on his/ her own utopian dream undergoes a slight change or a radical metamorphosis, the digital

³ Baym, Nancy K., *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community*, Sage Publications, 2000, p. 5

transcription of it is soon to follow the same path of change, in an automatized mirror effect. There is no irrevocable transformation within the digital environment; everything can be done, undone or re-done with one click. This is not to say that the digital utopia is prone to systemic instability – on the contrary, its perpetual conformity to the user's view is the very element that provides consistency. This particularity of the digital (play)ground adds to the radical distinction between cyberspace and the real, but the paradoxical effect is the displacement taking place in some users' minds – in the most extreme cases of addiction, the complete substitution of the real with the digital, going as far as producing the rejection of the former.

The mutation of the digital environment from virtual playground to an addictive substitute for reality represents a twofold process. First, cyberspace and real life become interchangeable in the mind of the user, than he/ she manifests a non-dissimulated preference for the former. The phenomenon resembles Baudrillard's theoretization of the stages of simulacra, but the directly perceivable results of the Internet addiction have been clinically proven, medically analysed and psychiatrically explained. Their existence has already been documented, beyond mere philosophical inquiries or psychological theories. The cause for this, and simultaneously the only obvious metanarrative of the digital, as opposed to the real, is boundless freedom; limitless possibilities, the chance of "experiencing" a completely new dimension of existence and the absence of any need to conform are all facets of constructing an avatar in cyberspace, but in the same time they encapsulate the reasons for addiction. Providing such a multitude of chances to adjust one's identity through designing one's avatar, together with the excessiveness of freedom, cyberspace tends to produce a negative reflection on the "objective" reality of the user. The interface between real and virtual functions as a delegitimizing process for the former. Given the limitless possibilities formulated by virtual reality, the real does begin to resemble a "desert".

Progressively unfolding the inherent conflict between the real and the virtual, the individual begins to deliberately blur the distinction, only to legitimate the digital as the favoured matrix of personal existence. Unlike social and individual identity in real life, the identity constructed within the digital can eventually de-materialize the "true" one, defined by economic, social, personal, ethnic or gender-based constraints. If at first only attenuated by the possibility of experiencing existence in a completely boundless environment, the real begins to be sanctioned for its inadequacy to the individual perspective and its incapacity to rise to personal standards, so, in the case of addiction, it gets sublimated altogether.

This displacement of identity within the digital is marked by a complex phenomenology, as each user is not limited to a single new digital alter-ego, but constantly exposed to the possibility of assuming multiple identities. Each new account, each new user-name creates a new digital extension of the self, a new cyber-materialization of a desire. And if the intervention of the real becomes too intrusive for the digital existence, there is a new solution at hand: delegating the virtual identity to another user, who, for a certain amount of (real) money, will be playing instead, so that the game itself does not suffer any damage. The preservation of the functional and evolutionary integrity of the digital environment is an essential part of its quasi-autonomous existence.

The phenomenology of (re)constructing identity within the digital environment is intimately connected to the particularities of cyber-spatiality: as the "territory" is non-finite, its occupants escape all types of regularization, evade all attempts to contextualize a limit. The cybernetic pattern of interaction between individual and environment is marked by another crucial feature, next to boundless (digital) space – instantaneity. Instantaneous access to any segment of virtual space and time means a transcendence of perception itself, not only of that directly concerning time and space, but also to the one connected to one's parameters of

existence. Interaction is always instantaneous, temporality is suspended, and the digitalized environment functions not according to rules, but on the contrary, within a rule-free framework.

The instantaneity of interaction does not imply that the digital space is characterized by meaninglessness – meaning is always remnant, always validated and re-validated by each and every user, according to each and every individual perspective. Meaning has not disappeared; moreover, it has multiplied itself, its expansion being capable of permanently adjusting in order to conform to any change in the user's vision. Individuality is simultaneously dissolved in the mass of Internet users and heightened by the limitless possibilities to create, adapt and re-shape one's identity within the cybernetic community. Each individual becomes able to build a particular configuration of his or her own master narrative through the fragmentation and pastiche of the ones previously articulated by society; the new digital identity becomes the contextualization of the user's personal norms and representations, a unique vision of existence, apart from reality, but visible to the other users as well.

With the cyber-identity so perfectly hypostatizing one's desires, its capacity of becoming addictive does not resemble usual forms of dependence. Instead, the user's conceptualization of otherness begins to refer to the real. The digital is perceived as the most appropriate environment for self-development, whereas the real seems a medium marked by a prevailing possibility of failure, the assemblage of all the potentialities denied, of all the wishes unfulfilled. With each reevaluation of the possibilities offered by the two – the real and the digital – the former is superseded by the non-restrictive structure of the latter. Degendered, deterritorialized and elastic, cyberspace is conceptualized as the very embodiment of individual freedom.

Just like social identity, constructed through perpetual interaction within a certain community and adherence to various sets of societal liberties and restrictions, building a digital self involves the same factors – except for the part involving restrictions. Each user is free to build multiple identities, a new and different one for every game played. Virtual world games and role-playing games, they are all based on the same concept of building an entirely digital identity in a specifically designed cyber-world, within the thematic framework of each environment and having as sole boundaries those dictated by the functionality patterns of the digital world.

There are no restrictions regarding transgressing boundaries – between different games, different online communities or different versions of cyberspace – and the same transversality remains valid for the digital identity (or identities). Even if within each particular cyber-world the possibilities are boundless, each digital identity is normalized and validated only *inside that world*. Identity itself is immutable. Another game, another identity, same user. The transitional trajectory of each user seems to be in contrast with the arbitrary, seemingly static, territory-bound character of each particular identity. However libertarian might this form of escapism be, within the interconnected free flow of digital information, there is one instrumental rule: one must build an identity for each new cyber-universe. Thus, the concept of identity is being eroded by its own metamorphosis in the digital: once signed in, and having consequently overtaken a particular identity, the user cannot shift between various cyber-dimensions without appealing to another version of it. Identity is thus marked by specificity, as it is only validated for the particular environment for which the user has created it. The features conveyed by each cyber-world eventually shape the design of the single or multiple identities; the particularized identity becomes instrumental in the user's perception of the virtual reality he or she "inhabits".

Along with identity, causality is another element which undergoes a metamorphosis in the digital space; the interconnectedness between cause and effect, as opposed to the real, is no more straightforward or natural, it is shaped by the same multiplicity of perspective that dictates the entire functionality of cyberspace. Based on this substantially shifting causality, perception or representation will automatically be layered, unstable, disjointed. By digitalizing human attributes, each cyber-dimension constructs a matrix of subjective rules and individualized codes, within which the user can create an apparently timeless but space-related identity, corresponding to the particularities of each setting.

The patterns of information used to generate each slice of cyber-reality are all designed to transform the digital space, seemingly deprived of authentic sensations, into a valid and articulate environment, where identities can be substantively developed. Thus, the textuality projected by the medium-plus-identity assemblage becomes coherent and meaningful, not only for the user, but also for the entire online community, since it all functions as a whole, according to the same principles, within the same framework of identity building.

Between the digitally constructed identity and the particular environment that validates its existence there is a programmatic pattern of doubled manipulation: on the one hand, the user is shaping and re-shaping the environment, and on the other, the digital space itself molds the possibilities of hypostatizing each identity and of inscribing it into the functional configuration of the whole. Consequently, each identity seeks to evolve – whatever definition of evolution might be applicable – and, simultaneously, to re-articulate the (virtual) reality and contextualize it in order for it to best fit the user's evolution. The combination between identity and environment becomes an autonomous and homogenous matrix, with meaningful interaction and consistent (even though self-referential) existence.

Within the synthetic design of each user's personalized utopia, the development of the newly evolved digital identity is solely restricted by self-imposed norms. Even though society – its online projection, respectively – can play a formative in the construction of a particular identity, this role is never coercive. Unlike real societal circumstances, digital environments do not impose, they only mould. Individualities are rendered without interpretation, without the critical feedback of the (cyber)community. Perceived in mostly visual features, each identity is on its own way to evolution, seemingly undisturbed by the other digital entities, occasionally – but not obligatorily – marked by substantive interaction, as in the real world. One thing is to be noted, though: the digital narrative, utopian or not, tends to present such confidence in the ability of computer development, that it can “conflate the distinction between potentiality and actuality”⁴. Irrespective of the personalized dynamic of transformation and evolution, the user intentionally eliminates interdependence, on two distinct levels: any direct interconnectedness between different (digital) identities is cancelled and any potentially disruptive interference from the community is disregarded.

Inside cyberspace, community does not play a formative role, has not got the power to issue norms that regulate personal existence, as in real life; instead, it is solely a more interactive element within the environment, programmatically blindfolded towards any inconsistencies in the development of a particular identity, and simultaneously seemingly clueless regarding the embedded artificiality of its construction. The digital community becomes only a part of the background in the evolution of identities, lacking an active

⁴ Coyne, Richard, *Technoromanticism. Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001 (1999), p. 20

implication in regulating processes and missing the authority to control the inherent clash of different visions.

In the virtual playground, a suspension of disbelief is no more a crystallized attitude for those who become part of it, but a normative premise for the very existence of the digital environment – it is not a programmatically structured dimension for its functionality, it becomes the basic rule of contextualization. Questioning the reality of the digital is equivalent to questioning the real itself – it all depends on perspective and on the understanding of the various degrees of simulation. In Baudrillardian terms, it would be a matter of discerning between the artificial and the imitation of artificial, the possibility of an authentic grasp of reality being already cancelled in this typically postmodern space⁵.

The digital(ized) utopia is characterized by a rather paradoxical combination of features: it is simultaneously a celebration of individualism and a markedly interactive environment, the mirror image of the community and its evolution. Its relative independence from factual elements, from the „objective reality” is symptomatic for its capacity to transform itself regardless of any pre-established norms. The context of cyberspace provided an endless environment for experience, new forms of consciousness and subjectivity, as well as innovative ways of constructing hierarchies. The specificity of the cyber-utopia is its unlimited potentiality for transformation, for continuous restructuring and reshaped patterns of interaction, but also raising questions related to ethics and the means of digitalizing the body itself⁶.

For each user, the digital utopia of cornucopian identities signifies an annulment of expectation and the institutionalization of immediate fulfilment. The temporal aspect of any wish is cancelled, instantaneity becomes the key to individual(ized) evolution. Ideals, even though embodied digitally, go from the status of unattainable directly to the condition of being fulfilled; one click encompasses the entire transcendence of the complicated dreams of reality into the digital consistency of immediate realization of personal utopia, garnished with the perfect vision of the self. The virtual identity is no more a surrogate, a simulation, but a cognitively valid appropriation of perfection, in an alternate – but progressively coherent – environment. No matter how substantive the immanence of the real identity may remain within the new one, digitally enhanced one, the latter is as close as possible to each user’s unique utopian scenario.

The construction of digital utopia(s) – or, better said, the manufacturing of each one’s own utopia in cyberspace – can only be interpreted from a dual perspective, comprising a facet of cyber-escapism, a deliberate retreat from the real into the digital, but also a facet of actual construction, a coherent desire to structure a new environment, with new functional criteria. The newly evolved cyberculture, a mixture between social/ personal utopia and an inherently technotopian discourse⁷ could be considered the contemporary actualization of the classical strain of utopianism, digitally upgraded as far as the actual fulfilment of the utopian

⁵ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994

⁶Fuery, Kelli, *New Media: Culture and Image*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009 - the author takes into consideration aspects such as the digitalization of the body and the ethical norms associated with creating a digital self (pages

⁷ Since technology is the key factor in creating this particular “alternate universe”, decrypting the structural meaning of digital utopia must necessarily include reference to the techno-science that ultimately shapes the potential of each digital environment and the degree of implication for the individuals connected to it.

vision is concerned, but with its ideals eroded by extreme subjectivity and individualism. The digital utopia is capable of actually projecting the user's vision in an articulate manner, strictly corresponding to the programmed parameters. Unlike the literary and cinematic instances of utopia, cyberspace⁸ allows for actual interaction and subsequent change, *evolving* according to various criteria and shape-shifting in conformity with the user's desire. Consequently, it is marked by an entire array of particularities, the most prominent of which being perhaps the focus on computer technology as the basic condition for both digital and human evolution. Individual identities, easily reformulated through the means of digital technologies, acquire a paradoxical condition: they are virtual, yet valid, within the limits of cyberspace. The cyber-utopia works simultaneously as source and stage for the digitally constructed identities.

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⁸ When he developed the concept of cyberspace, in 1984, with the novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson used it to describe a particular type of environment, an interactive virtual reality where the matrix of free-flowing information was basically the energy source for the functioning of the entire system. One could say that the very existence of the digital space, as foreseen by Gibson, has already technotopian features.

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