Another Life in Cyberspace
The Peculiarities of Second Life

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The rise of virtual worlds and the 3D web is accompanied by great transformations in the way in which we communicate and interact, publish and learn, meet people and have fun, do business and are involved in politics. The best-known and most flexible virtual world is Second Life (SL). Web sociologist Albert Benschop explores this digital world and compares the structure of the 3D web with the structure of the old, flat web.

Second Life? I hardly have time to live my first life . ..

The residents of SL interact in a 3D environment. At first sight SL looks like an online role-playing game for a great number of players who are jointly building a virtual existence. Participants create their own digital images. They determine the appearance and character with which they want to live in sl, where you can be whoever you want to be and do whatever you want to do.

The difference between SL and games such as *The Sims Online* and *World of Warcraft* is that the use of SL is not determined by locations and rules that are incorporated in its software. Therefore SL is not a game with pre-programmed story lines: it has no clear-cut playground, no rules of play, no assignments or specific goals. You cannot 'win' in SL.

The environment offered by the inventors is completely *empty*: there are neither subjects nor objects. When SL opened its virtual gates on 23 June 2003 there was nothing; there was no place to go to and nobody to be seen.[1] This empty world is brought to life only when the residents themselves choose a digital alter ego (an avatar) and determine what they want to do in this new world. The residents of SL receive the means to adapt the virtual world to their own wishes and ideas, and subsequently they can share this world with equals. So SL is in the most literal sense of the word a co-creation.

SL has a self-developing structure and not a prefabricated one. There is no mission; there are no assignments to be carried out and no bonus points to be gained. Nobody tells you what to do. SL is not a chatroom, not a marketplace, not a site for social networks. It is all in one. SL is a *simulation of reality* within a 3D audiovisual user environment. SL is an electronic living environment or a metaverse (metaphysical universe).

Fantasy World

SL is not a second-hand world but an opportunity to lead a second, virtual life beside (not after!) our local life. At last our longing for rebirth can be realized in a non-infantile way. And this time not as the *idée fixe* of survival beyond the grave, and not with the religious belief in the immortality of the soul (offering only false hope of an eternal hereafter). The second world is not so lofty and can be found in the virtual regions of the here and now. The virtual kingdom belongs to this earth and to people currently alive.

In our first world we act bearing in mind the *materiality* of our body. This body is bound by place and time. In this world we can be in only one place at once (the physical body is indivisible), and we need time to bridge the distance to another place. In the digital world things are completely different. In the digital world we need not surmount natural barriers. Our body remains 'at home', behind the computer screen. In virtual space we are liberated from our corporality and only our avatar manoeuvres, as a more or less fantasized or idealized representation of who we are or who we would like to be.

Those who enter a virtual world have the possibility to redefine their *appearance and personality*. This digital representation leaves ample room for the most divergent and extreme fantasies and phobias. It is a large-scale, carnivalesque masquerade in which (almost) nobody is who he or she 'really' is. In SL everybody is really who they pretend to be. Only the digital character and his or her virtual achievements are real.

In SL you can make (nearly) everything imaginable. It is the ultimate fantasy world in which an environment is created in a complete class of its own, with powerful and very flexible instruments. It is a *challenge to be creative*. Those who are not creative get little attention. And that is what the virtual world is mainly about: *attention*, as expressed by the number of visitors and the duration and frequency of their visits.

SL is a completely 3D space, able to imitate the physical world to a very large extent. But it can also differ greatly from the 'real world', if the *imaginative powers* of the designers allow it to do so. The virtual world poses only one limitation: the restriction of human fantasy. The virtual world is in essence a domain where we can indulge our fantasies.

However, in many ways SL is embedded in the daily life of the first world, not only in a psychological and sociocultural respect but also, and especially, in an economic respect. In the fast-growing virtual economy of sl, products, services and land are purchased with 'Linden dollars'. There is a stock exchange where you can buy and sell Linden dollars. In many respects the virtual exchange rate behaves like that of any other foreign currency. More and more companies offer *real life* products and services for sale for Linden dollars. Companies and institutions make use of the advantages SL offers and build their intranets and extranets there. They buy a piece of land in SL and build a virtual office on it. The organization's personnel use this office as a workplace, and it also functions as a marketing and sales outlet for customers.

Digital Spitting Image – Divine Incarnation

Avatars are not of this world. In the virtual world only the digital alter egos of the residents act. Avatars are of crucial importance to the use of artificial identities in cyberspace. Internet knows many temptations. But the major temptation of SL is its capacity to fulfil a classic and previously unattainable wish: *the desire to start life anew*. [2] SL offers the opportunity to construct a completely new identity. 'In your Second Life, you can look like nearly anyone or anything you want! '

Some people consider their SL experience a mere fantasy; others regard it as an extension of their off-line personality, which can lead, more than ever, to the blurring of boundaries between reality and fantasy.

One example of blurred boundaries can be found in the construction of avatars. Many SL residents spend a great deal of time on their avatars. Avatars are not simple images but *fantasized images* in which real and imagined aspects of identity merge. In an avatar you articulate how you prefer to present yourself and/or how you prefer to be seen by others.

The construction of an avatar is a divine act of creation. The designer is a god who, in his immense wisdom, creates a new human being that contains a little bit of himself ('after one's own image') and a little imagination. Fantasized, idealized, dreamed, wished for, hoped for, transposed, construed, perverted, cultivated, mirrored, crossbred. 'Avatar' is an

accurate characterization of the digital image – in Sanskrit, 'avatar' means 'divine incarnation'.

As true gods we mould our identity to our own will. We model our sex and age, our bodily shape and features, our outerwear and undergarments, our hairstyle and make-up, our adornments (jewels, tattoos) and attributes, our posture and physical movements, our facial expressions and gestures. We can pose as humans but also as animals, dragons, monsters, little robots, cuddly toys or objects. [3] If so desired, we can make ourselves invisible, a condition that allows us to sit somewhere unnoticed and listen in. We can communicate with other avatars by means of text, voice, posture and facial expression.

Peculiarities of the 3d Web

What makes the 3D web so special and so new? How does this new web differ from the by-now-so-familiar flat web? To trace the structural and dynamic peculiarities of 3D virtual spaces, we start with a schematic summary of the differences between the flat and the 3D web (see pp. 74-75). The ***structure*** of the old web is characterized by independently operating sites in an unlimited virtual space. Sites are mutually connected, in the abstract manner of random dots on a flat surface. In the 3D web, however, separate sites are interdependently linked together in a delineated virtual space. Sites are mutually and concretely connected because they occupy specific places in a 3D space. This structural difference has immediate consequences for the manner of ***navigation***. In the 2D web we navigate within and between sites by means of a hyper-transition. Clicking on the magic hyperlink allows us to move with lightning speed from site to site. In the 3D web we can make our avatars travel just as fast over great distances. But the characteristic transfer takes place much more smoothly: we navigate from site to site by having our avatar walk or fly. We no longer operate in an abstract universe in which we move to other sites via hyperlinks, but in a visually marked-out space in which we can make our avatar move.

The difference in structure also has consequences for the way in which we orientate ourselves in the virtual world. In the 2D web, ***orientation*** occurs primarily with the use of search engines that offer results corresponding with our search terms. In addition, we make use of directories and portals specialized in certain subjects. In the 3D web we orientate ourselves with the help of a human potential for which there is no need in the flat web: our ***spatial imagination***. [5] It allows us to orientate and position ourselves in a spatial living environment, even when this is a merely virtual one. In spite of a flat screen projecting images of a virtual world, we are able to visualize something in three dimensions. [6]

There are other differences that strike the eye. In the 2D web ***information*** is (re) presented primarily in a textual way, whereas in the 3D web information is (re) presented in a much more visual way or as images. More precisely, in the 3D web hypertextuality and hypervisuality are combined.

This enrichment of the modes of information transfer has immediate consequences for the nature of ***communication***. Most communication in the flat web is textual. Although the use of emoticons offers compensation, it remains difficult to convey emotions directly in a nonverbal manner. [7] In the 3D web we can communicate with one another in natural (spoken) language as well. Moreover, our avatars give us the opportunity to communicate nonverbally, by means of posture, facial expression and gestures. Since SL enables us to express feelings and emotions directly, it's possible for activities to assume a greater degree of complexity and ambiguity. [8]

From a socio-scientific perspective, the main difference between the old and the new web lies in the way in which we experience one another's ***presence*** in virtual space. In the flat web users are invisible to other users. As a rule, visitors to websites do not see which other visitors are simultaneously present on the site. In communicative internet locations – such

as chat, im and web forums – the presence of others is visible only in the form of screen names, written profiles and lifeless, non-animated avatars. In the 3D web, thanks to avatars everyone is instantly visible to all other avatars present in the same delineated space. This perceptibility of virtual presence reinforces the sense of social presence.[9] The 3D web is a *space of proximity*.

The perceptibility of virtual presence has immediate consequences for *accountability*. In the 2D web internet users are not directly accountable, because they are not directly visible and recognizable – except on communicative web locations. In the 3D web, avatars present in the same location instantly experience one another's presence, recognize one another's virtual *identity* and can address one another directly.[10] This may lead to an improvement of opportunities for online self regulation; it's certainly a topic that calls for more research.[11]

Theoretically, possibilities for *expansion* of the 2D web are unlimited. In a practical sense, the number of sites is restricted only by the number of local servers that we can dispose of. This was and is the consequence of the decentralized character of the network of networks that forms the internet. For 3D environments such as sl, it has been a different matter so far. At the moment, organizing a private SL server and modelling the system on personal goals is still impossible. Thus the expansion of SL remains dependent on the number of central servers that make this internet environment run. SL is a *centralized network*. In such a network a central server ('broker') regulates traffic among individually registered users (à la Napster). Such a centralized architecture indeed facilitates efficient and extensive searching, but the system has only one entrance point. As a consequence, the network may collapse completely when one or more servers are put out of action.

This brings us to the last point of comparison: *power formation*. In the decentralized structure of the flat web the power of a site is determined by the number of visitors ('number of eyeballs'), the number of links that refer to a site and the reputation of these incoming links.[12] In the 3D space that is SL we are dealing with another type of power formation. Power in SL is realized in the form of the concentrated presence of sites on a 'sim' (a spatially delineated part of the virtual space facilitated by Linden Lab). As a result, real power is usurped by sim administrators and property developers who operate as true colonizers of these virtual spaces.

Rights for sl-Citizens

We have seen that the 3D world of SL entails a series of transformations that can be compared to activities on the familiar flat web. These transformations have made the internet even more exciting and vital than it already was. Without a doubt, the most striking transformation lies in the field of the social presence that can be simulated in 3D environments. Criticism starts where the technology of SL is centralized (and privatized) in such a way that a premium is put on the power of capital, endangering the democratic standard of the virtual world.

sl is an extremely flexible and creative virtual world. It has had a strong evolution, has gained a worldwide reputation, and currently houses millions of enthusiastic residents. Yet SL is not without question the only and the best virtual world. Since the beginning of this century the number of virtual worlds has grown explosively. SL has to prove that it is robust enough to be accepted as a developing standard for the construction of a worldwide, 3D, multimedia virtual world. SL can prove this only by continuing to innovate rapidly. And even more than new technologies facilitated by sl, innovation depends on the creative energies of the residents of this virtual world. Furthermore, it is of the utmost importance that SL citizens obtain rights that can protect their carefully created digital constructions. Unfortunately, this is not yet the case.[4]

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Footnotes

1. A comparison to the biblical story of the creation is there for the taking. 'Now the earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep. ' (*World English Bible*, Genesis 1, verse 2). But this time it is no ethereal god operating as the great creator, but people of flesh and blood creating their own world from behind their keyboards.
2. In the past the childish desire to be reborn – at any price – was usually transformed into the religious longing for the hereafter. SL offers the chance to fulfil this typically human longing, resulting from the fear of death, in a non-irrational way in the virtual second world.
3. Most residents of SL enjoy indulging their fantasies and 'reinventing' themselves. The more SL grows, the greater the need for realistic avatars. Until now it has been rather complicated to design a photorealistic avatar; at present, however, a few minutes on *Avatar Island* is all that's required to design an alter ego that resembles a photograph.
4. For a few hundred Linden dollars you can buy a camera on sl, allowing you to take pictures or make films in the virtual world. The lenses enable you to zoom in or out.
5. People first have to take a good look around in this 3d space, learn how to move around and how to communicate with other people. It takes a while to get used to this new world. You see newcomers in strange bodies taking their first unsteady steps in a strange environment. They stop to marvel at all the extraordinary creatures with peculiar names. The first experience with SL can best be compared to entering a pub where everybody is a stranger.
6. In pre-modern societies, space was the area in which one moved and time was the experience one had while moving through this space. In modern societies, social space is no longer restricted by predetermined spatial boundaries. We can now envision spaces we have never visited.
7. SL is not a separate environment unrelated to the internet. It is an integral part of the internet. Like e-mail, chatrooms and instant messaging, SL facilitates online communication. The possibilities of this communication and its media resources, however, are far greater than they were in Web 1. 0.
8. The fewer communication channels available (e. g., only audio versus audio plus video), the more limited the capacity of the medium and the smaller its ability to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity. Owing to technological mediation, virtual teams and organizations are restricted in their ability to perform tasks with the greatest complexity and ambiguity. I have analysed this phenomenon in more detail in *Virtuele Organisatie en Communicatie*. See: www.sociosite.org/organisatie.php.
9. It has often been assumed that physical proximity is required for the realization of 'real' social relations and communities. In the classic formulation of Erving Goffmann, this condition of 'copresence' is stated as follows: 'Persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived' (Erving Goffmann, *Behavior in Public Places,* 1963: 17). Now we know that personal relations and community formation can also occur in virtual arrangements when the *sense of social presence* can be generated there.
10. As the use of virtual reality becomes more and more of an everyday activity, the boundary between physical and virtual space increasingly blurs. In the long run, virtual reality will become 'a low-resolution version of reality' (Mitchell Kapor). The virtual world is becoming a normal condition of our daily existence. Many SL participants are already experiencing a blurring of the boundary between their digitally constructed identity/identities and their appearance in local reality. They do not experience this as a problem, however, but as a challenge. They do not really care if the interactions that influence them come from the local or the virtual world. Most are highly aware of the fact that in cultivating their online personalities in SL they are also transforming themselves – perhaps completely.
11. The sustainability of one's existence and safety in SL depends on

the extent to which participants collectively succeed in regulating the activities in SL and in protecting their community against criminal usurpations and commercial colonization. This capacity for self-regulation is no doubt the major success factor, as well as the major fail factor.
12. This has been described in more detail in my analysis of the topology and dynamics of the internet: *Zichzelf organiserende netwerken* (Self-organizing networks). See: www.sociosite.org/netwerken_theorie.php.

Tags

Media Society