

A Daydreamer of Someone Else's Dreams, A theoretical framework for the future Web

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Abstract

This paper describes theoretical and methodological frameworks around aesthetic exchange in the virtual world. These frameworks hypothesize about the merging of social networks, avatars and online interaction, in what the author proposes as a future *metaverse*. This latter term refers to the technical, psychological and socio-cultural ways of living and interacting while being logged online permanently. This includes quotidian activities that already form part of our networked interactions, such as socialising, sharing and collective-content-production. Here it is important to deter other remedial solutions to the complexity and ambiguity of such hypothetical mergence: some of those solutions are defective at best and merely demean the rich transference between identity, self-representation and subjectivity experienced in the *metaverse*. The remedial solutions around the idea of uniformed and standardised representations of the self (or *travatars*) remain unhealthy. They merely serve to threaten the rich cultural production of subjectivity and the flux of multiple identities that constitute a small but highly influential part of the humanisation of virtual and digital technologies through aesthetic exchange in online interaction. Consequently, the design, use and cultural value of avatars and their equivalents in the virtual world will be critically examined in this paper.

Parallel Lives

In 2009 Cameron Chapman's hypothesis about the future of the Web was one among several envisioning the merging of virtual worlds (VWs), the Web and social networks (SNs). In Chapman's view that would soon lead to a three-dimensional, browsable interactive environment populated by uniformed avatars with standardised identities, behaviours and attitudes. [1] And indeed by 2014 this was not yet the case. Katrina Glerum called these remedial avatars *travatars*. [2] Chapman's blog project contains fifteen predictions implying that social media applications and permanent online interaction are at the forefront of the future Web. The merging actually will occur through the idea of intelligent interaction with the future Web of things, Artificial Intelligence and Augmented Reality. Chapman envisioned a packed, secure, ubiquitous and standardised Web that would change "from creating artificial-intelligence apps that interpret data much like humans do, to more semantic tagging conventions that make it possible for current online apps and services to make

sense of what code means to humans." [3] In this panorama, uniformed *travatars* will transform presence and subjectivity by embodying us much in the same way our Facebook or LinkedIn profiles do today, albeit fragmentarily and by means of a by-default 3D puppet on the screen.

Presumably *travatars* would have enabled inter-platform communication, agency and social interaction within VWs. However, due to the uniform standardised format of technology, that 'gain' may well have been at the cost of important humanising features such as the capability for empathy, *autoempathy* [4], more flexible and broader paths of self-representation and, therefore, enhanced subjectivity. In this short paper I will review how the problem with the *travatar* is that uniformity and technical standardisation would come at the cost of losing avatars' subjective 'voice'. Compared to the auto-empathic capabilities of SL avatars, the so-called 'remedial' avatars know as *travatars* lack important features for empathy, social bonding and humanising subjectivity, despite being able to function across different virtual environments. Simply put, the fact that *travatars* will be able to talk and respond to a 'universal lingo', displaying a sort of by-default-behaviour and personality, will not prevent a lack of the very process that humanises avatars and makes them compelling: aesthetic exchange, (dual) subjectivity and embodied agency. These are precisely what make an avatar function as a true *actant*ⁱ [5], our true identifier and personaliser, a subjective hybrid agent in the *metaverse*. This perspective stemmed from my research around Second Life-based art (SL) between 2006 and 2010 [6]. Unlike Chapman's view, I think that discussing forms of avatar-interaction for the Web of the future ought to go beyond the literal (or exclusive) use of 3D characters represented in a virtual environment. Rather, it is self-representation, affectivity and interaction in the *metaverse* that will be and already is key to the theme,

ⁱ In *Oneself as Another* Paul Ricoeur uses the term actants to refer to characters or players capable of affirming themselves through action and narrative. He states that "narratives express (represent) worlds inhabited by agents capable of responding to questions such as 'Who is speaking? Who is acting? Who is recounting about himself or herself? Who is the moral subject of imputation?'"

particularly considering the innovation of Web 3.0, ubiquitous computing, portable sharing devices, augmented reality and emotional and subjective technologies in development today.

It is the interrelation of three factors—dual subjectivity (DS), dual aesthetics (DA) and *autoempathy*—that fulfills the investigation of merging social networks with Web and Virtual Worlds interaction, complementing technical and communication research. In this sense, it is my feeling that Chapman's prediction fails to qualitatively address this merging, and consequently important factors and processes in the discussion remain out of scope.

Faster By the Hour

Do not get me wrong. I enthusiastically support technocultural advancement, greatly valuing the possibility of social interaction through unified virtual platforms that promptly and efficiently provide interaction for the metaverse. However, I hold some concern about the detrimental effect of the standardisation of *travatars* in cultural, behavioural, affective and social terms. The current rich relationship between Avs and their actual users would be lost due to ‘one-size-fits-all’ avatar uniformity and standardisation. Thus I will try to delineate how and why the subjects of aesthetics, virtuality and identity-subjectivity production matter so much for a future merging, and how these features act as an empowering psychological-sensorial device for users. And also why this is important when proposing a theoretical mainframe for the future of online interaction in the *metaverse*. In short, I propose a critical view and an alternative analysis of Chapman's hypothesis for the future of the Web as outlined above.

Worldwide networks have become more numerous, complex, hyper connected and faster by the hour. This creates the impression of a global *hyper-vicinity* in which everyone feel compelled to design, update and reshape—frequently—their professional, emotional and personal identities. Chapman's hypothesis does not address a broader and deeper view of this phenomenon in which the boundaries between the real and the virtual have been conflated. The lack is relevant not because technical standardisation and uniformity in protocols were wrong, but rather because subjectivity and identity—as demonstrated by virtual worlds and game interaction—define the extent to which affect and psychological-perceptual paths to self representation are pushing to the forefront of interacting in the metaverse. [7]

Informational environments are virtual *per se*, whether they are represented as three-dimensional or not. They will soon be ‘inhabited’ not only by avatars but also by protocols and devices of augmented reality, geospatial data and even voice-computer control, not to mention vision, sensorial and talking devices. This in turn points to the merging of interactive devices with affect, subjectivity and emotional technologies of the future. For

me, such an idea coalesces in the metaphor of *hyper-vicinity*. However, no matter how promising the advantages of these features on techno-communication appear to be, our experience with them may decrease if they become highly standardised and uniform. This may actually threaten the more complex subjectivity, affective expression and cultural production that current aesthetic exchange displays in VWs. I have researched the avatary representation of the self in VWs, which demonstrates peculiar and variegated ways of negotiating and shaping identity, self-representation and subjectivity, particularly in SL-based artwork. My findings align with Anna Munster's position on new media art, information aesthetics, embodiment and bio politics. Munster coined the term *space of reciprocity*, referring to digital aesthetic exchange as the “production of differentials” emanating from virtual and online art exchange. In this process, what is crucial is *the extension of the body*: avatar users experience intense variation of self-representation and embodiment due to the mutability and multiplication of identities and subjectivities. At the same time, and due to digital embodiment, one experiences *virtuality* as an “inextricable imbrication of biology with information and information technologies.” [8] Munster states that bio art (to which virtual worlds and games belong) compels us to *interact with or embrace virtuality through our dialogical relationship with the metaverse*. This dialogism reminds us that life is not just a “force that inhabits the organism but a network coextensive with information gathering, retrieving, storage, manipulation and management techniques.” [9]

We meet the space of reciprocity precisely in the interstices of subjectivity and the production of differentials. These are processes triggered, propelled and enhanced by digital embodiment and virtual aesthetic exchange. According to Munster's framework, the digital body constitutes a significant part of the (re)materialisation of new media, as the material body rests insoluble within the aesthetic experience and virtual immersion. Because of that, the space of reciprocity is absent of commercially standardised and uniformed versions targeted to mass media interaction with consumers. In my view that accentuates the production of differentials, singularity and individuality, which will be necessarily expelled and/or reformatted via mainstream media's technological uniformity, monetisation and other market tendencies imposed by *travatars*. Rather, the space of reciprocity emerges from *a new contemporary bio art ethos* in which audience and practitioners become engaged and implicated in an ethical dimension mediated by virtual aesthetics exchange. In this sense informational patterns penetrating both parties result in tactically relocating bio art expressions during the production and examination of the material conditions of information culture. That is—borrowing Munster's thesis from *Materializing New Media*—experiencing virtual aesthetics does not exclude the material body from the experience. Rather, it actually

enhances the experience of it by virtually including the digital differential constituted by all the instantiations of the original identity, thereby rematerialising the body in the process. This is both the notion of subjectivity and the represented-identity pattern applied in my theoretical frame.

Munster's new aesthetics genealogy of information is therefore one "that acknowledges new media's relation to materiality [...] that takes into account the ongoing engagement of information, and new technologies with embodiment." [10] It does so through the interaction between avatars, actual players and the intense differential, all shared and collectively produced via aesthetic experiences in the *metaverse*. This interactive richness would be lost if we were to develop (consciously or not) a reductive habit of viewing the interactions exclusively in terms of a prosthetic character upon which we project our personae. This is particularly true of uniformed and modular 'formats' like that of the *travatars* suggested in Chapman's predictions.



Fig 1. Lacan Galicia, my main avatar in SL, 2008. Copyright Francisco Gerardo Toledo Ramírez.

My main SL avatar, Lacan Galicia (LG) interviewed the avatars of four SL-based artists in a blend of semi-unstructured interviews, *in situ* interaction and textual and cultural analyses of the virtual world. LG observed their work, experimented and participated in their performances and installations between 2007 and 2012. [Fig 1] The interviews and (n)ethnographic observations around virtuality and aesthetics were developed throughout this period. During this time, I designed a relatively new hybrid research method that merged qualitative research methods, media and cultural studies, critical theory and virtual world aesthetics. Additionally, in my latest publications, I have combined critical perspectives from subjectivity production as a result of immersion, user experience and online interaction. I have also been researching and teaching these topics in other courses—Branding and Packaging Design, Design Semiotics, Signage and Wayfinding Design and Culture and Design—at Western University and at the

Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico City. As disciplines, they share subjectivity, identity and online representation of the self and interaction, albeit for different reasons. The study of design, interactivity, virtual and digital techno culture has resulted in the hypothesis that the merging of interactive VW aesthetics, social networks and avatar self-representation is core to envisioning the Web of the future from a broader point of view that is not exclusive to computers, communication or engineering.

Aestheticisation of technology

Dual subjectivity (DS) and Dual aesthetics (DA) are terms borrowed from Italian media and film professor Vito Campanelli. In his book *Web Aesthetics. How Digital Media Effect Culture and Society*, Campanelli outlines a frame of reference for understanding how and why the emergence of subjectivity and cultural production is of utmost importance in current digital culture in general, and in particular as an outcome of aesthetic exchange attained from interaction in the *metaverse*. Both terms are intimately linked and blend in the artwork of Gazira Babeli, Eva and Franco Mattes, Bryn Oh and China Tracy (aka Cao Fei). All of these are avatar names and identities. The essence of that blend relies on how an aesthetic mode of production coalesces symbolically in SL-based artwork—how the artists access, play with and critically and aesthetically use virtual world representations, interactivity and communicational data. According to Campanelli, DA is "a typical feature of a world, like the present one, that has turned into a global shop. In it, objects, people and experiences conform to a diffuse aesthetic dimension" [11] reshaping and modifying our epistemologies on the virtual, telepresence and identity that is digitally represented. Elaborating on Mario Costa's *Dimenticare L'Arte* (Forget About Art), Campanelli's idea of DS outlines how aestheticisation of technology is present and continuously running among western notions of art. Costa's idea allows Campanelli to reflect on how artistic subjectivity becomes extended to amalgamate with/in machinic processes, which also relates to Costa's theory that the arts constitute an *aestheticisation of technology*. [12] According to this view, three ages exist: Technical Arts, Technological Arts and Neo-Technological Arts. SL-based art, as a part of "the broader field of electronic interactive virtual arts" [13], belongs to the third category, which implies that these forms of networked digital art operate as *blocs of sensation* [14] as hyper mediation, narrative, hypertext and dual subjectivity forms. Digital and virtual world artwork also shows traces of older yet influential media, and post-modern theories on culture, science and society, which illustrate the unbalanced relationship between technique and culture today. This, of course, is characteristic of the hybridisation of media and information in mid to late

twentieth century art so that “the previously dominating position of the ‘subject’ is replaced by the ‘languages’ and the ‘text’.” [15] The idea of “an aesthetics of the object and the self-operating machine” is key to a new arrangement of enhanced and extended consciousness, that of the *human hyper-subjective* amalgamated to *machinic subjectivity*, “of which interactive practices typical of new media and the communicational dynamics induced by the digital networks are the first signs.” [16]

What my avatar LG experienced while in the virtual world shows the degree to which individual subjectivity has become enhanced by virtuality and interactive mediation. As such, they represent versions of the “technological hyper-subjective.” What is more, returning to Costa’s theory, Campanelli unveils an important aspect: the belief that contemporary subjectivity is connected to and depends on the fluidity of digital networks. “The contemporary hyper subject is made up of human and machinical-technological (computational) components, including the protocols, processes and the hardware and software platforms regulating the functioning of digital networks. Networking, as a cultural practice based on making networks, is a multiplication of identities, roles and methods no longer built exclusively on human beings but also on non-living beings and relevant topologies and physiologies.” [17]



Fig 2. Bryn Oh's Second Life Simulation, 2010. Copyright Francisco Gerardo Toledo Ramírez.

Conclusion. A Daydreamer of Someone Else's Dreams

Spanish scholar Juan Martín Prada emphasises the human half of the human-machine aesthetics in his analysis of how digital humanities affects interaction in the *metaverse*. The interviews and observations of SL-

based artwork demonstrate that the merging of online social interaction enhances subjectivity, self-representation and symbolical embodiment in the *metaverse*'s virtual dominion. This in turn improves SL ethos as well as the interaction between art and residents (users in SL). The experience of dealing virtually with the ‘real,’ albeit through techno informational-communicational paths, means that virtual aesthetics is a *continuum* of perceptual patterns balancing hybrid forms of bio art, bio politics, hardware, software and emergent emotional technologies. About these forms of aesthetic exchange in the virtual, Prada writes that “today, vital interrelations between people and technology become productive ones. The most important raw materials with which the ‘social worker’ of the web works today are those concerning *interpersonal relationships*.” [18]

The identity of avatars carries a particular sense of ‘selfhood’ that depends on digital manipulation (for instance when designing one’s avatar appearance) and a mutable subjectivity that function as a filter and affective-enhancer device. This is what Italian new media and film studies scholar Adriano D’Aloia refers to as *autoempathy*. In the SL-based artwork I studied, this phenomenon is present to varying degrees. The most transparent illustration of *autoempathy* is found in Bryn Oh’s oeuvre. In her work, *autoempathy* proves to connect avatars, embedding and representing them through empathy by unfolding narratives created between the artist and the audience (residents or visitors). The possibility of (your) avatar becoming a day-dreamer of someone else’s dreams is not only fascinating but feasible due to the malleability of the avatar’s subjective and affective transference. This possibility is constantly shown and yet strategically hidden in Bryn Oh’s virtual scenarios and *machinima* works. Bryn achieves this by an ingenious montage of proliferative narratives, self evolving role-playing and perceptual immersion. But of note is the construction of ethereal architectonic spaces targeted to seduce our intellectual sphere and affective and perceptual self-awareness within the landscapes she builds in her SL environment called *Immersiva* (fig 2).

A theoretical mainframe for discussing the future of the *metaverse* can be outlined including the conflation of diffuse distributed aesthetics, social online networks and the production of subjectivities. The nature of art as documentation (SL-based art) is difficult to apprehend, resulting in our growing “inability to distinguish between the natural and the artificial: the surface of a living being can conceal a machine; conversely, the surface of a machine can conceal a living being.” [19] Boris Groys implores us to preserve the malleable-mutable dynamism in the production of cultural subjectivity and identity resulting from dual and virtual aesthetics. To date, it remains threatened by the emergence of *travatars* on the web of the future.

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