A study on reconstructing meaning and experience with virtual restoration

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1 Introduction

This study will discuss virtual restoration in cyber-space of Sungnyemun - one of the prime cultural properties which was ruined - through the creation of characters in cyber space.

On 11 February, 2008, the Korean number one national treasure Sungnyemum, an ancient historical gate in central Seoul, was burnt down by an arsonist with foolish anger. The incident damaged national pride and people felt very sad for the loss of one of the most important symbols of Seoul city. The architecture, originating more than 600 years ago, was a considerable part of Korean's everyday life. This created a feeling of absence in daily life - yet its spirit was felt to remain. There was a huge desire to restore the national treasure in various ways, including a reconstruction plan, collecting funding and creating a virtual Sungnyemum on-line.

In this study we will look at the simulacra[1] of the building in Second Life, to consider how virtual restoration of Sungnyemum was created in cyber space. This restoration was completed through a process involving four levels of reproduction. In this paper the process will be explained. Also, more broadly, the characteristics of cyber culture will be discussed.

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[1] Plato defines Simulacra as a copy of a copy, so like false pretenders they are built upon a dissimilarity, implying an essential perversion or a deviation. It is the unique phantasm (the Being of all beings), It is the power to affirm divergence and decentering and this makes power the object of power to affirm divergence and decentering. This power is the object of a superior affirmation. Gilles Deleuze. 1990: 204, 302.

2 Second Life

Second Life (www.secondlife.com) is the world's leading 3D virtual world environment enabling enterprises and educators to build custom, immersive spaces and applications which increase productivity, creativity and innovation while cutting travel costs and doing business in a more eco-friendly way. Since opening the doors of Second Life in the United States (2003) more than 13 million people are participating. More than 50,000 people from the republic of Korea have begun life in Second Life.

Major cities around the world exist virtually and these include many famous buildings such as New York's Yankee Stadium, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Amsterdam Central Station, etc. Some cities and buildings, along with avatars with identities, make a culture in Second Life. Through disassembling and relocating an imitation of the real world is created, where each of the buildings, avatars and cities are compacted in a space with each as an independent piece. For this reason, virtual Seoul in Second Life is interpreted as a cubist painting, as virtual Seoul is made by reconstituting each part in sections from the real Seoul (See Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Figure 1. Seoul in the real world. Figure 2. Seoul in Second Life. Figure 3. Jean Metzinger (1883-1956) Aldeia, 1912

3 Construction of Sungnyemum

Sungnyemun is comprised immaterially of meaning, experience and it's external physical shape. Firstly its meaning and experience extend their spatial sphere as time goes by: Sungnyemun has been expanded from its (lost) physical space to the city Seoul and the nation Korea. Thus, invisible spaces of meaning and experience are piled up upon each other in Second Life. This make Sungnyemun like a channel

between civilization and tradition. Secondly its physical shape in Second Life helps give meaning and experience through acting as a cultural property - accessible to anyone wishing to visit the virtual site.

4 Reproduction process

4.1 Reproduction Level I: simulacra of information

The virtual metamorphosis of the Sungnyemuns' shape revealed a limited surface of its solid physical form. This meant the role of its shape was lacking somewhat in terms of physical detail, however meaning and experience can be considered to be vaporized and dispersed over the surface of the substitute.
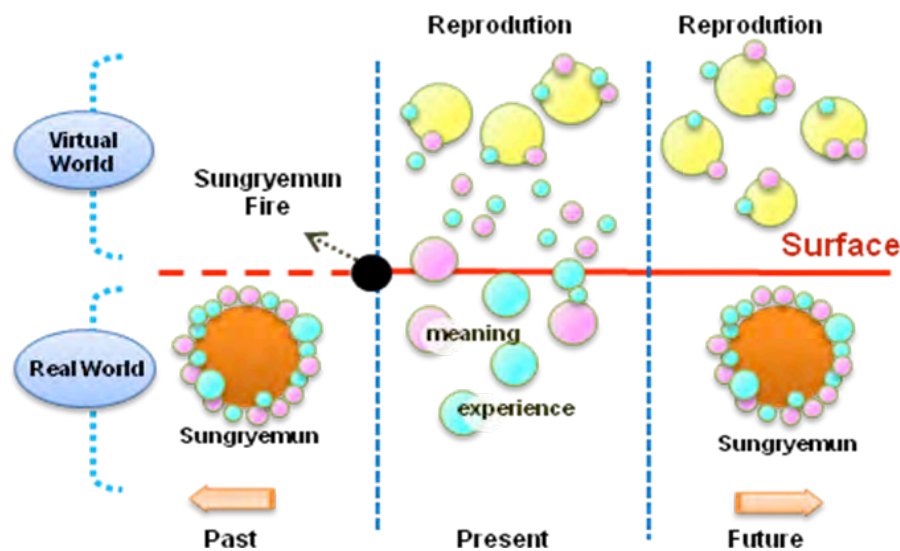

 Figure 4. Division into real and virtual spaces

Figure 4 shows the process - the creating of a surface and dividing this into two spaces, resulted in the simulacra being created. Particular attachment to the appearance of Sungnyemun was the biggest issue because of the fire resulting in the building appearing burnt and collapsed. Therefore, simulacra had to incorporate this into imagery and serving as a monument within the flow of history. Meaning and experience floating over the surface searches for appearances and are absorbed into the afterimages individuals carry with them.

The desire for restoration was linked to a cyber campaign and the exchange of information on the network through a series of events. Meaning and experience are expressed on the surface of the building and these perceptions, located in the individual's consciousness, are expressed as behaviours. These behaviours drew from the communication behaviour on the Internet i.e. the series of events: 'The 100 day memorial for the destruction of Sungnyemun', 'the photos of old Sungnyemun in 1904', 'the soul of Sungnyemun restored by Pansori' and 'the candle ceremony for the clear spirit of Sungnyemun'. Thus the restored essence of subjective purpose came into being from the streams of information on the network.

4.2 Reproduction Level II: Simulacra of of image

Sungryemun as the most universal and objective shape is restored to 3D, as well as having perspectives from multiple visions - as parts that were seen in the real world. Sungryemun restored in virtual 3D in Second Life is detailed enough to distinguish giwatjang, mono and the contrast of building bricks, along with a detailed textual description.
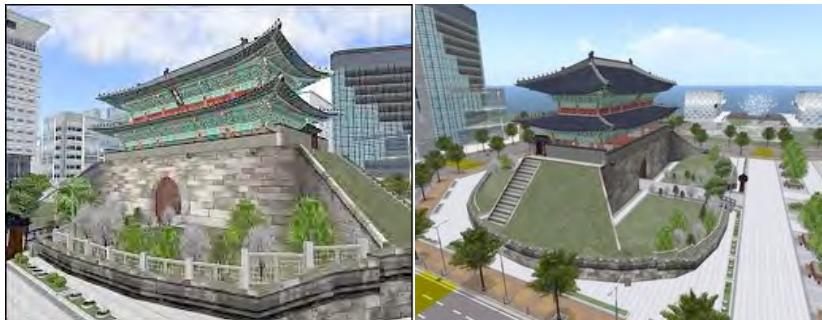

Figure 5. Restored Sungryemun in Second Life

With keeping similarities and likeliness of the real thing, it is possible to maintain habits of meaning and experience: the virtual image of Sungnyemun has both collected and continued these. For this reason only the appearances were restored at the beginning in Second Life. This is an example where an organically built virtual building, with the appearance of a real shape, can act as a centrifugal force in society through its continued generation of immaterial and invisible things. The shape of the virtual building 'fixes' its reality in virtual world. Thus, Sungryemun existed as only one thing in real world, but can be created in different spaces in the virtual world each with its own sets of experiences.

4.3 Reproduction Level III: simulacra of meaning and experience

When we say 'we look at Sungryemun, in virtual space this does not mean that we look at the essence of Sungryemun. We look at a 'recovery' and this is a consolation which we hope to see through the medium called cyber-space. From making meanings from fragments of the image, immaterial things can quickly 'fix' the space of virtual Sungryemun, thus experience can be easily created and accumulated. There is not a fixed vanishing point(s) in Second Life - like the cubist paintings - rather it shifts its place by moving into areas of different spaces.

Figure 6. Object Map in Second Life   Figure 7. Experiences around Sungryemun in Second Life.

Figure 6 is the object map of Second Life. Objects are stations, cultural heritage sites and shopping centres etc., which are simulacra of real buildings. The map shows the number of avatars around those buildings. This kind of a map shows virtual buildings as the main elements of Second Life in which experience is originated. Therefore, when a chapter of experience begins, the (chosen) vanishing point will be created. The virtual restoration of Sungnyemun performs a role where activity is created in the hubs of buildings in Second Life and virtuality depends on configurations mirroring real society. These configurations of environment make the avatar personalities in virtual space reproduce intuitive experience and moving around the space seems clear and easy. Second Life Sungryemun has attracted people to visit the building and hold events by Avatars - as though it were everyday life in the real world (Figure 7). Thus virtual experience derived from Sungryemun is created through a complex piling up of remembrances which operate between the real and the virtual.

Various spaces in Sungnyemun can be experienced simultaneously each having their own vanishing points of experience - and all experienced at the same time. These experiences can be in the past, present and future - gathered as it were in the one place. In this way reality and virtuality are blended.

Once a perfect restoration of real Sungnyemun exists, virtual Sungnyemun will be able to independently mass-produce unique experiences - being free from the real one. Thus the space Sungnyemun occupies in our imaginations and memories will be more extended and diversified.

4.4 Reproduction Level IV: Simulacra of fixing space

Virtual reproduction is oriented to the fixation of a physical entities existence through being recognized and protected as such. Because the virtual existence can simply be recreated or disappear, to give it some protection digital people are trying to build a virtual society by relocating parts of it to ensure continuance.

In order to be fixed (and to continue) Sungryemun in SecondLife has a virtual community bond. Thus its space can be strengthened through forming common interests around mainly common things. These bonds of virtuality could be built as a communal social network - forming a national identity - which is uncertain in cyber-space. Shared social characteristics and cultures can come into existence through individual experiences and meanings: a co-relation based on community intimacy. Furthermore the virtual restoration of Sungryemun tried to close up the gap between reality and virtuality and was regarded as heterogeneous space. To occupy its own space, Sungryemun in cyber-space was built upon incorporeal priorities, rather than the original nature of things i.e. its built physical priorities.

In the point of fact, the individuals in cyber-space pursue community in order to make progress for a fixation of a variable reproduction, and this helps ensure its continued existence. This fixed space helps extend the intrinsic value of the reproduction in virtual world - one made by a mutual dependence with real objects.

5 The special feature of CyberCubism Space

In this manner, I define as 'cyber-cubism' as the phenomenon that displays the overlaying and unfolding of time and space. A special feature of cubism is 'position of form and space'. In Picasso' painting *Guitar on a Table* (1912), the object called a guitar was arranged with pieces dismantling on the same level.

Figure 8. Pablo Picasso, *Guitar on a Table*, 1912.

In the painting, the abstraction of the object as an image are comprised of broken pieces. In this way the guitar can be displayed as an abstract form in one space which includes immaterial meaning and experience. These spaces of fragments bring harmony between real and virtual space, combining an external physicality and an abstractly fragmented guitar. Like this cubist painting, Sungryemun made partitioned space of the real and virtual combine through its various fragments. Also, these broken pieces connected to each other revealed complex networks with their own independence. However the example of Sungryemun revealed that the majority of cyber-space users tended to be quite conservative in terms of preferring the more real world objects and representations. We surmised that this was because it was an attempt to quell the fear and anxiety of things changing things through external forces.

By extension of this study, it can be interpreted that the dominant power of the virtual environment has shifted to users, and information has been accumulated by users. Because they can create information, they can break the given rules given - like a game - within the limits of an environment in the virtual world. Users tend to take control of an environment in cyber-space and resist change in terms of technology and communication altering that cyber-world. Yet also they tend to create their own individual spaces and so a virtual environment is divided into innumerable spaces.

6 Conclusion

This study discussed the characteristics of virtual Sungnyemum, its 4 levels of reproducing simulacra, CyberCubism and Second Life. Firstly the characteristics of cyber Sungnyemum in terms of its connection with Cubism: Second Life environment

is the synthesis of the parts in the real world - which takes spatial structure of three-dimensional geometry, with dynamics of each fragmented piece as in cubism. Three-dimensional geometry became 4-dimensional space by adding the flow of time: the movements of an avatar and a building can be overlapped as the avatar moves or environment moves in 4D space. This overlapping resonates with cubist painting.

Another point of Sungnyemum in the net is that the cyber contract works as a cultural property - just as though it exists in real world. Although the actual Sungnyemum has been ruined, avatars representing people visiting the 3-dimentional images in Second Life enable the sharing of information and experiences. This illustrates the cyber world expanding into the real world, and the way meaning and experience can be continued in virtual space.

Secondly it should be remembered that Sungryemun is much more than simply the virtual forming of a buildings external appearance. While the physical appearance is obviously important so also is the feeling (by users) that this representation is 'fixed' in cyber space and this enables the network to expand network and thereby connect experiences - something only possible in cyberspace. In this way meaning and experience continue to accumulate and this in turn publicizes the virtual space. Although we detect a somewhat conservative use of the environment it is possible that after completion of the real restoration of Sungryemun the virtual version will continue and will fulfil its own unique role: users tend to spontaneously reveal their nationalities and identities - but they should not been regarded as isolated.

People in cyberspace reveal gradually, and observe, the virtual world as though undertaking a journey. This can help us open our minds to the idea that immanent worlds can have both common features and differences: there are similarities and differences, pasts and presents, presents and futures, and each user can express their character by getting together through synchronism in cyberspace. Thus, various spaces exist simultaneously - with each uniquely different part existing on the same time line.

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