

Chapter XXXIII

Augmenting Actual Life Through MUVES

Laura Anna Ripamonti

Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Ines Di Loreto

Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

Dario Maggiorini

Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy

ABSTRACT

The necessity of supporting more and more social interaction (and not only mere information sharing) in online environments is the disruptive force upon which phenomena ascribed to the Web2.0 paradigm continuously bud. People interacting in online socio-technical environments mold technology to their needs, seamlessly integrating it into their everyday life. MUVES (Multi User Virtual Environments) are no exception and, in several cases, represent a new frontier in this field. In this chapter the authors analyze if and how MUVES can be considered a means for augmenting the life of real communities and of people in general. The authors trace a framework of analysis based on four main observations, and through these lenses we look at Second Life and at several projects they are currently developing in this synthetic world.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN VIRTUAL AND ACTUAL: IDENTITY, RELATIONSHIP, AND PLACE

The relationship between online and offline life (but we rather use *synthetic* and *actual*—see Castranova, 2005 and De Cindio et al., 2008) has been widely

studied in recent years, adopting several different approaches and through the lenses of different disciplines (e.g., psychology, computer science, sociology, economy, architecture, etc.).

An exhaustive analysis of each of the aforementioned research branches is almost impossible; nevertheless, within each of them, some key features

naturally emerge denoting particular or remarkable facets of the complex relation which binds together the *synthetic* and the *actual* worlds.

Three key concepts, in particular, seem to be fundamental for investigating how synthetic and actual worlds overlap, intersect, and interact to “augment” each other, instead of being counterpoised (Mitchell, 2003; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). These concepts are: *identity*, *relationship*, and *place*. It is through these dimensions that we analyze how MUVES (Multi Users Virtual Environments)—among which synthetic worlds are one of the more “extreme” products of the cyberculture movement—are becoming more and more an extension of people everyday life. MUVES does not provide their users with an alternate reality, but augment and add “value” (which should be implicit in the notion of augmentation) to their actual life.

Our framework of analysis is based on four major observations:

- Observation 1:** online identity is an extension of personal actual identity, which is socio-culturally constructed and evolves over time in both worlds.
- Observation 2:** online social networks emerge, in the space of possibilities created by the Internet, as extensions of actual ones; in this process “online identities” can be involved as well.
- Observation 3:** synthetic places are the extension of actual, public, and private spaces. They augment people’s possibility to interact in online social networks and, at the same time, are affected and shaped by social interactions.
- Observation 4:** online identity, relations, and places can interact to augment effectively people actual social life. A careful and exhaustive design of the online social environment is required for this to happen: this

means that critical factors affecting social interactions among users must be taken very seriously, and need a consistent amount of study, to guarantee the success of a synthetic world.

Observation 1: Online Identity is an Extension of Personal Actual Identity

The Cyberculture movement (Markham, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 1998) assumed that technology allows people to detach from the actual world, inventing a completely different “virtual” identity. This new identity is completely unconnected to the actual one, since the physical/actual world is cast aside when entering the cyberspace. However, it has emerged (see, for instance, Graham, 2002) that personal identity is based on the interaction between physical and virtual elements even when identity is considered in terms of the online world, thus leading to a completely different conclusion compared to the Cyberculture perspective. Indeed, in the actual world, our body is a *mediator* in creating our personal identity, but when the body is abandoned—precisely as in online social interactions—“technology” replaces it. Paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan (1964), we can consider “technology as an extension of man” (Lister et al., 2003). Just as our corporeal bodies are integral to our personal and social lives, digital self-representations (e.g., avatars) are central to our experience in synthetic environments (Polsky, 2001).

In this vein, Manuel Castells says that people with online identities are nevertheless “bound by the desires, pain, and mortality of their physical life” (Castells, 2002, 118), while several case studies support the assertion that online identity extends offline identity: see, for instance, the analysis of RumCom.local newsgroups (Rutter & Smith 1999). Hence we can say that identity is socio-culturally constructed for both the virtual and the actual environments.

Identity in the actual world is continuously evolving, due to the interaction with the multiple

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