Chapter 14

Real Life and Second Life, Osmotic Membranes:
Dynamics of Identity and Social Relationships in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

The project has as field of study Second Life: a three-dimensional world, online, persistent multi-user, interactive, participatory; where the individual’s self-presence is guaranteed with an avatar. It has been proved that Second Life is perceived by individuals as an actual experience and full of meaning, so as to allow the dynamics of identity and social relationships. This process of incorporation into the avatar would ensure the online presence of the individual and the recognition of other avatars, as individuals. This would facilitate effective social dynamics among avatar: the new social-actors, that would be perceived as strongly emotional and interactive, allowing individuals to recognize the other avatars as subjectivity, experimenting with new identities and mediating new meanings with them. The analysis of these dynamics has shown the potential of experience to be an avatar and sociality inworld, and is not in opposition to the real world, but come across as an extension, a empowerment and can be integrated into real life.

INTRODUCTION

Second Life is a digital world. This digital world is the crossroads between different cognitive fields, thanks to years of experimentation, and engineering studies, IT, design, game industry, etc. This is inserted in the Web 2.0 patterns, and is presented as multi-user 3D online platforms, giving individuals the opportunity to meet, interact, create groups or communities, build relationships, feel sensations and feelings. The interaction experienced in a digital world is not limited to a virtual experience of contact between human-computer, let alone to an experience based on the logic “one computer, as our second self” (Turkle, 2005, p. 1).

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SECOND LIFE: THE SCREEN LIKE A MIRROR?

The digital worlds fulfill the desire to penetrate the screen, moving away from interactions read on the screen, like in the first virtual communities or in the early text chats, to hypermedia experiences with other individuals, through the use of an avatar. Therefore, it’s possible to be present in a digital world: impersonating an alter ego, an interaction is established with other avatars, created and moved by other humans; a synthetic body, interconnected to the real body, which feels and reacts.

The entrance, the immersion in a world represented on the screen, with dense realistic frames, provides the illusion of involvement; in this regard we talk about mental attitude adopted by the individual.

The description can be summed up in the dual attitude of being at the screen and feeling the screen, defining the knowledge of the subject to be at the computer in an online world and at the same time feeling inside the online world.

According to Borsani (2012), the immersion in the imaginary is essential and has a vital role in any simulation system, enabling the involvement and effectiveness of the experience. It is also necessary to emphasize that the immersion as a process is not to be regarded as lacking intentionality. Because as stated by Borsani (2012), it is an experience actively lived by the subject, not passive, that mobilizes all the cognitive resources.

It is the subject that in a synthetic world decides and makes his choices, acts and reacts to events in the reflective dimension of his intentionality (Borsani, 2012).

Today, to have an experience in a digital world, in an online space with three dimension, you must first and foremost look. The attitude of the on-screen look, during an exploration of a digital world, it is not comparable to a view, but it is an active look at the present, full of intentionality, of psychological competence on the part of the individual who is the active protagonist, thanks to an interpretation of the continuous feedback from other avatars and the artifacts present in a metaverse.

The exploration in a digital world is not limited to the display of landscapes, but thanks to the presence of the avatar as a mediator of experience (Coleman, 2011), it is possible to visit places, listen to the sounds, interact with the artifacts and other avatars that are already present in that land. To this end Borsani (2012) primarily emphasizes the cathartic function of these scenarios, and then the ability to facilitate the user’s identification with his character, releasing their anxieties projecting them onto another plane. For Borsani (2012) the user finds himself in a virtual world in which actions open up new possibilities and new realities, offering the user the chance to cooperate inworld and learn how to develop action styles in a world of constraints and freedom, a real possibility of initiation to the world of self-discovery in a conservation dimension, in parallel with the complexities of the everyday world.

The experience with the digital world in some respects can be considered a game, but having regard to its seriousness, is definable as “serious game”, with very similar characteristics to the real life, and most of the resident call it a serious game, as stated by Borsani (2012), who for years has been firsthand resident, avatar and researcher in different online worlds.

The online worlds are not considered a game or a role-play in the strict sense of the term, but in the experience inworld you live all the typical features of the game. Thanks to this impersonating process, free, without rules and then organized with structured activities (Giuliano, 1997), the subject, of school age or adult, learns a behavior and forms of social collaboration. The experience of impersonating the one or the other role model gives to the subject the possibility to adopt the game attitude of others (Giuliano, 1997).
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