Metaphors of Experience and Self
in
Interactive Systems

DANYLAK, Roman
Stockholm University
Department of Computer Systems and Sciences
Forum 100 SE-164 40 Kista SWEDEN
roman@dsv.su.se

Abstract — The discussion is focused on the experience of selfhood in current interactive formats. The self, it is proposed, evolves from reflection within media forms such as textual narratives and image depictions and as such is a historical construction that changes as new media evolve. Terminology that is used to described communication with interactive systems, in particular Weiner’s notion of the ‘cyborg’ and Arseh’s notion of game-based ‘ergodic literature’ are discussed as is the idea of the multiple game playing self. Artificial intelligence is also briefly discussed.

Keywords: self; new media; game; metaphors.

I. INTRODUCTION: DEFINITIONS AND DILEMMAS OF SELF.

Deckard: ... You remember the spider that lived in abush outside your window: orange body, green legs. Watched her build a web all summer. Then one day there was a big egg in it. The egg hatched—

Rachael: The egg hatched, and a hundred baby spiders came out. And they ate her.


[Rachael runs away when Deckard turns to get a glass.]

From Blade Runner Dir. Ridley Scott [1]

The above dialogue, between Deckard, the hero in Ridley Scott’s Film Blade Runner played by Harrison Ford, and a female replicant, that is a humanoid robot with whom he falls in love with, Rachel, encapsulates a core experience of simulation as a seductive reality. The scene shows both Deckard’s initial cynicism regarding representation, experience and reality, but then shows how he momentarily feels for the replicant, thinking he may have caused offence to a lady, unsure as to whether to disbelieve and treat her as object or otherwise respectfully as a ‘human’, encapsulating the dilemmas of selfhood that new technologies may present us with.

The notion of the self, that is the individual, is not a global or natural phenomenon. In Western culture the self as an idea can be located in Judaeo-Christian heritage [2] where it is stated that ‘I am...’, affirming self-conscious identity, which was then subsequently secularised by Descartes in the 17th century into his dictum ‘I think therefore I am...’ [3] attributing rationality to self-consciousness, short references for the early construction of the self. The topic is itself enormous, but the point is that the idea of a self varies from culture to culture, from historical epoch to epoch. As such the self is a construct within a cultural and temporal reality. How that notion of the self as content is communicated and experienced within a population is very much dependant on the media that delivers the message [4]. However, neither the Judaeo-Christian traditions, nor Cartesian philosophy, have ready answers for the current dilemmas and inconsistencies that are experienced through novel interactive technology depictions and experiences of the self.

From a technological perspective, the identities of our current self are intrinsically intertwined with information communication technologies evolved over the last half millenium. Fuller [5] describes the quest for knowledge by emerging from the European Renaissance as primarily driven by a need to dominate the planet, a process that was made achievable by a number of key inventions including Cartesian mapping coordinate geometry allowing records of geographical travel to occur. Similarly, Galileo, having perfected the telescope in 1610 [6], made it possible to see in the distance, primarily because he could alter the passage of light and with that the experience of seeing. The depicive experience of
The different types of new individuals emerging at this time are easily observed in the works of Shakespeare [9]. The differing levels of adaptation to the new role of reader and interpreter of information is central to how their experience of selfhood unfolds, with clear and differing consequences of empowerment achieved and also not achieved. Hamlet, for example is an over-reader, a man who walks about with books in his hand, a philosopher with a keen and active mind, capable of predicting behaviour of the guilty king and his accomplices, but he is unable to balance his intellect with action to effect a political change having cataclysmic effects. Macbeth, on the other hand, is a poor reader as he does not correctly interpret the riddle of the witches as to the course of future events and goes forward driven by blind ambition and illusions and thus comes undone. Whilst King Lear is an example of individuals who read differently, his daughters driving the process of hereditary ownership in different directions to what Lear interprets as the future path. Hence, to read and interpret as an individual was central to the experience of self gained through the new media of the Renaissance.

II. THE 20TH CENTURY: CRISIS OF SELF

The delivery of information in the late 19th and early 20th century through electricity, photography and sound recording sets the scene then again for a new experience of reality. McLuhan [10] describes the invention of electric light bulb as delivering instantaneous information in that a scene in darkness explodes into a false daylight through electric light, rupturing previously established sequenced experiences of time and space. These inventions challenged the old notions of self established in previous media forms as the world and its space as a travelled road with established conventions becoming redundant. Both the invention of photography by Daguerre [11] and the recording of sound by Edison [12], recording both sound and light will have the an impact as media on later interactive technologies; these two inventions which constitute the invention of film, give rise to simulation as depiction of the real world in minute and realistic detail.

The word ‘simulation’ describes here communicative technologies that offer an interactive experience of reality that is virtual, and where it often difficult to distinguish the original from the simulation. Baudrillard [13] describes simulation as the ‘evil demon of images’ describing an underlying fear and instability resulting from the persistent duplication of appearances, setting up competing realities. Turing, the inventor of modern electronic computing, in describing the computer as ‘a machine that makes other machines’ [14] sets in motion a revolution in the experience of reality pointing to its simulative capacity. In computational systems, delivered media through the combination of sound and light supersede older non-active non-programmable media such as books or films; the computer absorbs older media and also adds the possibility of interaction with the new media, creating a new space in which to be and communicate.

The crisis that new media invokes is clear and widely described. Barthes [15] describes the crisis of the new emerging era as the ‘death of the author’ ironically in a book in which he still enjoys the position of author. The significance of the death of the author is that the privilege of the self and its identity disappears as the new forms of information and experience emerge in the later half of the 20th century. Virilio [16] characterises contemporary new media as ending geographical separation and bringing the Renaissance project as described by Fuller to an end, and with it, the definitions and experiences of self evolved up to this time. The death of the author signals the end of the individual as a receptacle of the usually refined, reflective emotions as the engine and motivation of literature.

III. THE GAME PLAYING MULTIPLE SELF.

So much of the passing of the old has, however, also been accompanied by much that is new, in particular the emergence of multiple identities in online gaming. The game format, as a means of organising new media is exceptionally effective and becomes increasingly present [17]. Thus Arséth’s term ergodic literature [18] derived from the Greek – ergon and hodos meaning ‘work’ and ‘path’ consecutively, describes the means by which games form an experience through recombination and destination building. The terminology immediately suggests a new kind of process in interaction displacing past means of organization of information and most importantly human experience.

In Spielberg’s Film Catch Me If You Can is based on the life of Frank Abagnale Jr who in the 1960’s was able to defraud the Government and a number of financial institutions of millions of dollars and also elude capture by fabricating an identity [19]. The interesting fact about Frank and Spielberg’s depiction of his life is that to do what he did - simulate the lives of lawyers doctors and airline pilots - he combined a number of representative media to achieve the effect. Using Baudrillard's terms of counterfeit, production and simulation [20], Frank uses these three techniques which are evolved from three different historical epochs to construct himself and he does it in a game-like fashion but in the pre-digital world of 1962.

Through counterfeit Frank assembles mimetic images for passports documents not unlike a 16th century Dutch painter where glue, paper and paint are his tools; through
production, he industrialises these artefacts making many copies using machinery, and finally he simulates absorbing the previous two media, adopting character portrayals using the modern medium of television as his tutor. Most importantly, as the title of the film suggests, Frank is playing a game of pursuit and identity interchange.

Frank then is a precursor of the multi-identity game playing self, but he does it in a pre-digital world. The idea of self for Frank is non-fixed; he can be who he wants when wants. The problem of identity fraud continues to this day to escalate in the world, and the means of detecting such fraud become increasingly imponent. The computer with its ability to reproduce media, a machine that makes other machines readily and seamlessly, complicates the claims of copyright and originality assigned to images and text and their ownership.

IV. CYBORG AND AI

Weiner, who coined the term ‘cyborg’ [21] and writing a great deal of the literature that would define the signalisation processes upon which modern computing was designed, explained that ‘cyborg’ is derived from the Greek, kybernetes, meaning helmsman or steerer of a boat. Weiner, it would seem, saw the direction of his work as that which enabled travel, possibly a departure and a return. Virilio [16] proposed that computerised video systems of warfare contracted the physical world into a purely depictive state divorcing us from current reality. The characteristic of nullifying geographical limitations, where one is almost simultaneously in another place as was experienced first through electronic communication, suggests that travel may not be the only metaphor to describe the experience of the self with interactive systems. Then again, gaming allows travel through synthetic worlds. The conflicting interpretations suggest that a clear way forward in terms of a single experiential metaphor is as yet elusive

Johnston [21] describes a fundamental difference between the discipline of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) that AI claims to be a ‘realisation’ not just a simulation of life. Realization is an important fact, in that the depiction of the real especially through photographic and sonic process is fundamental to human-computer interaction processes. Whilst Hayles [22] describes a tension exists between simulation and realization, in that simulation may deliver a real and often indistinguishable experience that then falls into the category of the real.

V. CONCLUSION: A NEW SELF TO EMERGE

So as yet, the experience of interactivity is still very diverse and one might expect new types of experiences to be defined. Paradigm shifts in thinking are difficult to predict because there are no names for the new experience and as yet remain outside our vocabulary. What is certain is that certain boundaries and limitations of the old world – once the new world - are disappearing rapidly with the new communicative extensions of the computer. Just as new identities in the Renaissance were an accumulation of technologies and experiences, taking time to be culturally absorbed, understood and coordinated, the emergence of the potential of interactive systems is still entirely novel challenging the old self but still with much of its impact to be unravelled and understood without the new identities still in formation.

REFERENCES