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Decoding the DigIdentity : Self-representation in a Hyper (Virtual) Reality

Employing a unique language of codes and abbreviations, members of virtual communities construct online avatars following an ideology of personal disclosure unique to the Web. While the abstraction of self through media is not new practice (the very concept likely finds its roots in newspaper personal ads and video dating services), the ubiquity of online profiles (as well as their panoptic exposure on the Internet) reveals a new, burgeoning discourse of screen names, acronyms and digital imagery that in turn contribute to a communal hyper-reality of the "self." Far from being mirror-images of the user, what emerges is a carefully edited system of mediations- one that births a "digidentity," a digital reincarnation in an illusory world.

The emergence of online social networks has empowered its users with a new way to represent the self that is at once impervious to total personal disclosure yet vulnerable to global inquiry and judgment. While it can be said that who one is *online* should never be construed as wholly indicative for who one is *in person* (*digidentities* are often dubious doppelgangers at best), the development of interpersonal relationships that only exist on the net along with services that provide increasingly elaborate ways to reveal one's most intimate details (such as Friendster and MySpace) indicate a hierarchical system of representation that values the virtual over the real. Particular to relationships founded on fantasy (where anonymity allows one to eschew inhibition), admittance of reality is often prohibited, lest disclosure dilute one's dalliance in debauchery.

Applying Jean Baudrillard's successive phases of the image to the myriad of virtual communities and forums illustrates the varying degrees of abstraction with which one can represent an identity online. These degrees, however, are largely contingent on the web service that is accessed; some sites allow users to represent self by posting a plethora of signifiers (audio and video files, photo galleries and diary entries), while others allow users to solely interact via image uploads and superficial physicality. Illustrative of the first reflection of reality (where reality is unedited and presented as "directly" as possible), sites such as www.HotOrNot.com have become notorious for their rated picture galleries; here, users can judge other members on a gradient based on impulse attraction or repulsed reaction to a portrait. There are no quotes, no allegories, no media files nor narratives to support a person's character; simply a picture that is left unable to defend itself.

The second phase of the image calls for a masking of truth. In the realm of virtual avatars, this can be best exemplified by the chat persona. From the selection of a screen name to the creation of a profile, the user engages in a number of perversions that begin to give rise to their *digidentity.* Named with an (at times incomprehensible) iteration of letters, numbers and characters, *digidentities* are birthed from the cognitive process that chooses which truths are to be disclosed and in which manner they are to be revealed. www.Friendster.com and www.MySpace.com are currently the most ubiquitously used (citing over 13 million users when this author last logged in) and offer the clearest example of how a *digidentity* can quickly represent a user better than *they* can.

When a person is encountered on a street or in a social setting, codes imbedded in greetings, hand gestures, clothes and accessories can be immediately interpreted within that particular context. Unless a person is prone to traveling with their entire DVD

collection, magazine library or a set of picture albums documenting life from the time of their birth, getting to know a person well is largely limited to direct, physical interaction or background research (most often referred to as "gossip"). And a re-telling of a recent adventure, however theatrically exuberant, is far easier to divulge when accompanied by video. Hampered by the realistic limitations of human storytelling, profiles have proliferated because of the convenience they provide in helping users "tell" the whole story (often by displaying the story itself through media). The attribution of media to cultural preferences and personal histories all contribute to a seemingly holistic representation that would not be easily possible in reality. However, because profiles exist in the ever-on environment of the Internet, *digidentities* are consumed without a definitive context. How profiles are perceived and reacted to, like signs to signifiers, are truly arbitrary and contingent on the contextual specificities of the decoder. Harkening to the original thesis, *digidentities* are a powerfully protective persona because they allow users to present select traits while concealing the vulnerable from direct exposure.

There are occasions, however, where *digidentities* are created to do more than interact within a community of virtual avatars. In keeping with the third phase of the image, profiles can often be used to simulate a persona that may have no basis in physical reality, but online, are a tangible voice for what are often deeply hidden desires. Forums such as www.nineinchnails.net allow members to enact a host of socially deviant fantasies through profiles that can easily be argued as antithetical to the user's mundane reality. In William Gibson's "*Pattern Recognition*" the protagonist's friend creates a female chat persona to seduce secrets out of a frantic, gullible recluse abroad. So deeply is the ruse consumed that even a clearly doctored photograph offered as the image behind the screen name is accepted as truth. The seduction works, and the protagonist eventually

gets her coded message; the entire exchange evident of what happens when the simulated *digidentity* is elevated from being a profile to a persona.

The fourth phase lies in the creation of a simulacrum, a concept best illustrated by interactive game websites such as www.CityofHeroes.com, an elevated "chat forum" that brings the *digidentity* into a simulated universe of comic book heroes and villians. Once logged on (and payment is verified), users are asked to create their super-human persona with a palette of races, species, mutant powers, spiritual gifts and even a haute-couture wardrobe that any leather-clad fashionista would envy. As Baudrillard indicates, images in this part of the phase continuum "bear no relation to reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum." As a simulated superhero in a "three-dimensional" environment built from pixels and vectors fighting periodically occurring villains produced by random-number generators, the user is no longer engaging in an attempt to represent self. In this phase, the *digidentity* is its own entity.

The irony lies, however, in a perceived "invisibility" where one can make his or her presence felt while never fully revealing who they are. Even in a forum like City of Heroes where identity seems secluded from disclosure by the absence of photo-reality or personal narrative, anonymity is as much an illusion as the digital realm of pixels and Photoshop in which it resides. Even the vaguest of profiles can be traced to its physical owner (an endeavor made simpler when faced with a recent photograph, though even acceptance of this is predicated on nebulous trustworthiness). Despite this fact, millions of people the world over create thousands of profiles daily, all with varying degrees of care or foresight as to how their profiles will be construed. For much of *who* one is online relies on the communal decoding of a diachronic evolution of screen names, acronyms, movie files, sound bytes and digitized images. In accordance to the semiotic principle

that something only becomes a sign when it is referred to as one, a *digidentity* is only activated when it begins to interact with other *digidentities* which in turn afford it "sign" status by responding to its signifiers and interpreting what each signifies.

In analyzing its place in the history of visual culture, *digidentities* represent the nexus of advertising text that have instructed a generation of consumers in the art of allure and the laws of attraction. It is easily argued that the majority of profiles currently online exist in someway to draw favorable attention from a desired market. Profile creators employ devices (sub)consciously derived from a speech community that dictates: a) which images from a personal archive will be the best rated once included in an online gallery, b) which favored songs, films or books would signify membership in a specific caste or c) which words, phrases or codes will most likely connect one profile to another. *Digidentities* are also prone to adhering to a specific "look," particularly when situated in websites catering to niche markets. Services such as www.Gay.com, www.ChristianSingles.net and the myriad of "Friend Finders" promising to connect members of various ethnic communities to each other point to unique systems of visual representation wholly reliant on specified signifiers.

The significance of the "look" of a *digidenity* is most pronounced when considering a personal homepage or online portfolio. It is said that an oft prescribed catalyst for millennial narcissism is to have a dot-com after one's name; while this author is no exception, given the prevalence of celebrities, political candidates, student filmmakers, academics and novelists who grace their surnames with a URL, neither is this author alone in this endeavor. With personal websites, careful consideration over construct and execution is made to ensure that all media existing within the hyper-text conforms to a controlled pre-association of sign to signifier. The authors of these sites are

afforded tremendous control over the craft of their *digidentity*, which is most significant given that these pages often become a situational surrogate for the author himself. The phrase, "just go to my website" should not be misconstrued as laziness or an incapacity for personal disclosure on the author's end; rather, it is an eager, almost pleading assertion that the site is so close to a complete representation that it affords a greater (hyper) reality than mere dialogue. For example, while an artist can "tell" a curator about his work (or even "show" an art director a portfolio and curriculum vitae), an online portfolio facilitates a more comprehensive (and less cumbersome) display of work and allegory that reaches beyond one gallery and into a global network.

While our *digidentities* can never supplant our real selves, they are able to augment our physicality with opportunities and conveniences that facilitate interpersonal connections with others. While profiles can never completely represent a user's persona verbatim, the multitude of media and the complexity of narrative that one applies can, in fact, present a proof of reality by indulgence in the imaginary. For at its core, all *digidentities* are illusory entities that can only exist within the hyper-text: no matter how much detail one employs in the creation of his profile, it is done so in a de/re-contextualized forum that allows others to decode without the need for full inquiry. A person's sexual or cultural proclivities will be interpreted differently by the unique attributes of each user; and from that interpretation arises a new *digidentity* that can exist independently of the original user.

Digidentities are works of art, primarily because of the deliberate intention to represent that belies them; through the selection of media, they mirror similar self-reflexive cognitive processes that artists undertake when creating work. Relying on codes directed towards an audience presumed as equipped with a similar language or reference

from which to decode, users create autobiographical artifacts of cultural text. These, like all art, must succumb to an infinite universe of interpretations that renders the author's intended signified as no more significant than the meaning attributed by an external voyeur.

Like the "Untitled" self-portraits of Cindy Sherman, *digidentities* allow users to adopt different personas and mediations of identity through costume and parody. Sherman succeeded in her work because she understood beforehand how her simulated scenarios (evocative of film stills featuring familiar heroines) *could* be interpreted without demanding that they all be consumed the same way. In an image from her Fashion series, "*Untitled #123 (1983)*", Sherman is dressed in a black power suit complete with 80's shoulder pads, her blonde hair a wiry nest concealing her face save one blood shot eye; her body is tense and agitated, fists clenched in bubbling frustration. Each multi-tired code (from her fashion, her gaze to her posture) signifies a range of meanings: the oppressiveness of apparel advertising, feminism in flux, an angry, blonde executive representative of women in management.

While Sherman herself produced this image from a specific, possibly autobiographical context, it exists independent of that intent. Sherman's images allow people to maintain a voyeuristic distance from the narrative while inviting the same viewers to project their own histories onto (thereby participating in) the dramas in her prints. *Digidentities* contain the same ability by allowing users to projects themselves (or rather, their fantasies) onto the profiles of others. By providing users with a more efficient mechanism for creating social networks by targeting those with conducive interests, profile forums give *digidentities* something they cannot exist without : *a digicommunity.*

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1) *Untitled #123 (1983)* from Untitled Film Stills, Cindy Sherman

Web Sites:

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2) www.cityofheroes.com

3) www.friendster.com

4) www.gay.com

5) www.hotornot.com

6) www.myspace.com

7) www.nineinchnails.com