

The SIMS effect: Virtual Identities in Accelerated Reality

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The early 2000s heralded the simulation videogame *The Sims*, a primary illustration of the virtual reality phenomenon that has since become fundamental to contemporary life. While *The Sims* was not the first simulation videogame, and certainly not the last, its worldwide success was preliminary to our current state of virtual reality and identity.

Virtual identity has expanded and normalized; integrated into our everyday interactions as we update our Twitter feeds, post pics to Instagram and update our Facebook profile pictures. Anyone who participates online in any capacity will have a virtual identity, whether it is as incidental as a bank account statement, or as consciously crafted as a Facebook profile. Our virtual identity is the information regarding our identity available to be consumed online. Social media and other virtual forums have given us the ability to largely cultivate our identities, curating the information associated with our names and faces, primarily, to connect with others.

The ubiquity with which virtual identities have become a part of our lives leads one to wonder what the appeal of a virtual identity is, and, how much does it differ from our physical, supposedly authentic, identity?

Love, belonging, esteem and eventually self-actualization follow the principal physiological and safety needs in developmental psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs¹. This theory serves well in the context of our contemporary obses-

sions with virtual identities. The need for a stable sense of identity and correlating belonging is a pivotal feature to our happiness and well-being.

The belonging we feel with online peers who share commonalities in their virtual identities make for as authentic an experience and relationship as any. As the world becomes more globalized, community relies less on physical proximity as a means of congregating and more on common interests and affiliations. As trend forecasting group K-HOLE notes in their pivotal report *Youth Mode*, "Once upon a time people were born into communities and had to find their individuality. Today people are born individuals and have to find their communities"². While the increasing globalization of our culture has caused community-based identity to diminish, it has not lessened the need for belonging. The cult of the individual has thrived and subsequently isolated people.

In the past we may have used our occupations as the primary means by which we define ourselves, but the currently dismal global economy has resulted in a generation of educated youth who are unemployed or underemployed. The rapidly evolving tech-market ensures that this trend will likely worsen and that the millennial generation will not only enter the job market later in life, but will almost certainly have to change careers throughout their adulthood³.

People have found other means by which to define themselves, through affiliation with various styles and interests, and by accruing a sense of individuality based on personal preference rather than exterior accomplishment. Net artist Brad Troemel states in his collection of essays about art and the internet *Peer Pressure*, "An image is not just a proclamation of affinity, but a link back to that person's browsing habits, a way of selectively revealing one's own net history [...]" He elaborates on the communicative aspect of image aggregation, "[The] consciousness of a de-contextualized image's history serves as a social unifier"⁴.

Online image banks such as Tumblr give us immediate access to a massive archive of past material culture from which to pick and mix styles and traits inter-generationally, and connect with others online or otherwise. Aesthetic features being the easiest to manipulate explains the massive influx of tattoos, piercings and unnatural hair colors prevalent today.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of trends will prevail, and the attempt to be individual ends up resulting in massive conformity or "Mass Indie"². With everything so instantly available, all subcultures become immediately co-opted by the masses and subsumed under popular culture. The branding of our youth, a controversial topic since the '90s, has become so integrated into our way of life that it's now barely noticeable. New global communities form through mutual choices in brand identity, and this brand affiliation can occur in real life or online. Troemel explains "... in a Baudrillardian sense, image awareness culture has been equated with cultural participation itself – one's brand depicted on Tumblr is inseparable from her true physical being..."⁴, in other words, online, awareness implies affiliation.

The infamous trend Normcore is a definitive attempt to rebel against the intoxicating Mass-Indie colonizing in popular culture². The futile endeavor to differentiate oneself (lest one be unremarkable) resulted in a tactical rejection of counter-cultural style in the adoption of the relaxed, too-cool-to-care aesthetic of style-inept dads in bulky jeans, oversized sweatshirts, second-hand ball caps and New Balance sneakers. Normcore allows for a strategic avoidance of the dangers that come with associating oneself with any one subculture, that is, loneliness and a failure to keep up with the rapidly changing trends that occur and thus lose one's identity².

We consume each other's profiles based on their contextual references to popular culture and recognizable communities. Artist Amalia Ulman gained notoriety for an elaborate performance piece that consisted of her adopting an Instagram identity embodying a specific "type" born out of the age of social media: the rich, white, money-grabbing, socialite who thrives online as a "sugar baby" and "ghetto girl"⁵. She took innumerable photos in fancy hotels, eating gourmet food, and being thin, pretty and keen on plastic surgery, attracting thousands of genuine fans that either admired or identified with that persona. Apparently, even after Ulman revealed it was a farce, many followers still believed it was a sincere account of a real woman's lifestyle, revealing an underlying dichotomy between the truth and what we want to believe online.

One could venture to say that our online self is exactly as real as our physical self, seeing as we only exist in our own state of consciousness and through the perceptions of others. To those who followed and idolized the Instagram Amalia, she was real, and their relationship to her online persona, whether through the comments they left or the judgments they made, were authentic.

The debate against the validity of our virtual identities is that the self we create online benefits from the perspective of time and distance to edit so that we may release a more appealing version of ourselves to the world. Yet, our interactions in the physical world are no more objective than those made in the virtual world as we may refine our behavior in the presence of different people. In many ways, this merging of virtual and physical reality parallel the desire of the avant-garde, to collapse the boundaries between art and everyday life⁴. Virtual reality, if anything, may just be an accelerated version of our physical reality.

Future concepts of identity and truth will no doubt adapt to these increasingly common methods of communication, as every photo you post and every status you type contribute to the ever-solidifying identity you project to the world. There is a tendency to dismiss social media and virtual identities as trivial, despite the experiences heralded on and through them being fundamental to contemporary experience. It's easy to assume that interactions made online are artificial because of their lack of physical tangibility. Yet, the resulting emotions, thoughts and implications of such exchanges are as authentic as those that occur when you bump into someone on the street. Identity and reality are not set in state, but rather constantly evolving, and so as we shape our virtual identity so too we shape our supposedly "real" identity. As virtual reality becomes more integrated into our actions, relationships and experiences, it will become indistinguishable from a supposedly more authentic reality.

¹ Griffin, Em, *A First Look at Communication Theory*, McGraw-Hill 1991

² K Hole, *Youth Mode*, khole.net, 2013

³ Rattner, Steven. *We're Making Life Too Hard for Millennials*, The New York Times, Web. 2015

⁴ Troemel, Brad, *Peer Pressure: Essays on the Internet by an Artist on the Internet*, LINK editions, Brescia 2011

⁵ Muno-Alonso, Lorena, *Meet Artist-Cum-Instagram Star Amalia Ulman*, Artnet News, Web. 2014

Images at left:

Artist Amalia Ulman enacting her Instagram persona.

A Screen Capture from *The Sims 2*

A screen capture from the simulation videogame *Second Life*, featuring a character wearing an oculus rift mask, another technology that enables virtual reality