

Real vs. Fake
Identity Creation in Cyberspace

By

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Creative Commons by

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Dedication

While attempting to put together this project and paper, I decided to take an approach that I was not quite comfortable with. Throughout my art career I have always been production-based, and theory was always an afterthought. With this work I decided to get out of my comfort zone and make this a theory heavy work. This was a very stressful and often painful process, but as a result of enduring this it has made me more confident in my abilities. The success of this work was only possible with the help of a number of individuals.

First, I would like to acknowledge the members of my thesis board for all their constructive criticism and pushing me to do my best.

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Abstract

As the reach of cyberspace expands, the digital identities that are created within it are being classified as “real” or “fake.” This distinction pertains to how these digital identities correlate to the real-world lives of the users who have created them. For this paper I have investigated how digital identities are formed and the space that they reside in, with the intention of demonstrating that cyberspace is a unique world that is being generated through the participation of users via the use of technology. The theory is that in cyberspace, digital identities are not “real” or “fake”; rather, they are identities that exist as a direct result of participation.

To argue this theory, I have discussed the manner in which digital identities are created. The creation of the digital identity starts with the user and the decisions that are made in regards to the user’s graphical representation. The creation of the digital identity is finalized by its acceptance in the digital community, and that act is achieved through displays of connections. After investigating how the digital identity is formed, I used surveys, questionnaires, and case studies to examine how and in what manner the users participate. In the final section I have analyzed how cyberspace is formed as a result of the participation of the users in it, and I have explained how these users are participating

in a cyborg manner. As a result of the cyborg relationship a new world is formed, separate from that of the real world.

The final finding of this paper is that a new world is being formed in cyberspace, and the identities that exist in this world do not have a classification of either real or fake. These digital identities exist as a consequence of the choices that the user has made in regards to their participation in cyberspace. This decision process allows the user to create any identity that they so desire, and it is then up to the other users in cyberspace to approve, or disapprove, of this identity, thereby establishing its place in the digital world.

Preface

The Birth of My Digital Identity

The year was 1999 and I was in the first semester of my freshman year in college. Because I did not own a computer, I was in a campus computer lab checking my school e-mail account. As I was browsing through my emails, I discovered that an old friend from high school had found my university e-mail address and sent me a message, intending to try to stay in touch. In his e-mail he asked me if I had an AIM screen name. I had no idea what he was talking about. Then a day or so later someone else asked me the same question. This made me wonder what this AIM was and if I should have a screen name.

After some investigation I learned that this program that people were talking about was called AOL Instant Messenger, and that it allowed people to communicate, or “chat,” via a text-based interface over the Internet. This sounded interesting and fun, so I decided to participate; all I had to do to join was to create a “screen name.” After some trial and error, I settled on the screen name *kicker1292*. It was at this point that my digital identity was born, and I could then start collecting “friends.”

As time progressed, the capabilities of the Internet and my knowledge of it grew, and therefore so did my digital identity. The growth was slow at first, as I first came to

understand the workings of AIM, and then I began to explore some of the chat rooms that this program provided. Next, I found that my exploration of my digital identity led me to the creation of my own unique, non university-appointed email address, which was then followed by the discovery and exploration of a few dating websites. In 2003, I created my first profile on a social networking site, MySpace. Soon after I created a profile on Facebook, and since that time I have joined many more sites. With several different profiles ranging across numerous social networking sites, I decided to consolidate myself with my own homepage in 2004. After developing a few different looks for my homepage, I then incorporated blogging onto my website. My current digital identity is located at www.aaronpsmith.com.

Introduction

As cyberspace has become more user-friendly, more people are crossing into the digital divide and establishing their own digital identities. “Social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices” (boyd & Ellison, 2007). As a result, there are more and more people who are continually experimenting with their newly acquired digital identities in cyberspace. The credibility of content on the Internet has always been questioned, and the same credibility question applies to the digital identities that are created on the Internet. There are two classifications that I have given to individual digital identities: real identities, and fake identities. These terms, “real” and “fake,” refer to the relationship that exists between the user’s digital identity and their physical, or “real-world” identity. It is the goal of this paper to investigate the relationship between the digital identity and the physical identity. Specifically, I argue that in cyberspace, there is no separation between a “real” and “fake” identity in cyberspace.

First, I examine how the digital identity is first created and developed. The advancement of cyberspace, particularly with regard to social networking sites, has allowed even users with limited knowledge to actively participate in the digital realm.

This participation can occur through the development of a home page, or website, the creation of a profile in a social networking site, or even just by making use of instant messaging programs in order to participate in a chat room. “Users are known to others by self-authored names which they give their ‘characters’ rather than more telling e-mail addresses with domain names” (Nakamura, 1999). It is important to understand how and why the identities are participating in cyberspace, in order to better understand that there are no “real” or “fake” identities. “Personal home pages (digital identities) are online multi-media texts which address the question, ‘Who am I?’” (Chandler, 1998). It is this question of “Who am I?” that drives the user in the process of the creation of their digital identity. The user will need to know who they are or who they want to be in order to create a graphical representation of their identity.

After dissecting how digital identity is formed, I then consider how the users participate with their digital identities in cyberspace. It is this participation, or user-generated content, that is constantly creating and developing the cyberspace that the digital identities occupy. To best explore this theory, I analyze the feedback of a questioner that I distributed through social networking sites. This survey was conducted in order to get an idea of why other users were participating in cyberspace. The observations that were made from this questioner were then compared to other surveys that were conducted. I also examine as case studies a few prominent Internet personalities, such as The Fake Steve Jobs and Ysabella Brave. I argue these digital identities are not real or fake; rather, they are new identities that exist in a new world.

Finally, after investigating how users participate with their digital identities in cyberspace, I interpret how a user’s participation affects the structure of cyberspace. I

will also show that through the means of participating in cyberspace the user is doing so as a cyborg. I have to show that cyberspace is created by user participation, as well as illustrating the fact that this participation is generated by means of a hybrid of humans and technology. The result is the creation of a new world that is completely dependent on user participation with technology. This cyborg-like relationship that exists between the physical and the digital identities is very significant in order to show that cyberspace is being occupied by identities that differ from those identities that exist in the “real world.”

By outlining the thesis argument in this manner, this paper will successfully demonstrate that this new digital world, or cyberspace, is a world made up of new distinct and unique identities, rather than “real” or “fake” identities.

Before proceeding with this paper, there are a few terms that need to be clarified for the reader.

Terms:

- Cyberspace – a metaphysical space that is created by a global network of interconnected computers, which is in place for one to interact with other computers and/or people through their computer console. The “world of computer and the society that gathers around them,” as referred to by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer*.
- Social Networking Site – a web-based service that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd & Ellison, 2007).
- User - a person that is operating a computer in order to gain access to the Internet. In particular moments, individual users are asked to authenticate their identity (screen name or log in) in order to access web content or profile.
 - User-Generated Content - material that is created on the Web by a user and hosted by a third party website, such as a social networking site. It can be in the form of discussion groups, blogs, wikis, etc.

- Identity - this term is used in a number of different fields, but the basic meaning refers to an object (or entity) that maintains individual traits that distinguish the object (or entity) from a group (or community). In other words, the parts of an individual that allow that person to distinguish themselves from others, or the parts that can define who they are.
 - Digital Identity – refers to an identity that is established, through participation and decision making, by a user in a digital community, or cyberspace.
- Real – refers to an object (or entity) with verifiable existence; something that applies to normal space.
- Fake – an object (or entity) that is not genuine or real; having a deliberately false or misleading appearance.
 - Fakester – a term that originated on the social networking site “Friendster,” it refers to an individual that develops a digital identity that does not correspond similarly to their physical identity. For example, they could impersonate a famous person (dead or alive) or a fictitious character.
- Cyborg – a cybernated organism, which is defined as any individual whose normal biological systems are enhanced by technology, particularly electronics and communication devices (Hayles, 1999).

1

How Do They Do It?

The Creation of a Digital Identity

In today's modern society, and especially in the United States, the Internet is a very well-known and often utilized technological advance. As technology progresses and new devices are continually released to the public, we see a push for a closer bond between personal technology and communal technology.

Massive public Internet access first began by plugging a wire into your personal computer. As devices started to become smaller, the laptop was introduced. With the creation of smaller and smaller computers, users gained the ability to mobilize their computing. The next step in the advancement of the technology allowed these devices to connect to the Internet wirelessly. Now that users could participate on the Internet in a mobile manner, devices became even smaller, allowing them to be more easily transported, and Internet access was also added as a feature on most mobile phones, which eliminated the need for more than one device for mobile phone and Internet use. The trend seems to be a constant push to give users easier access to the Internet, while at the same time allowing them to have access to the Internet on a device that can be carried in a pocket or purse. Look at most mobile people, from developed countries, and you will often see that the things they constantly have with them are keys, money and a cell

phone¹. Global technology is promoting perpetual participation on the Internet, and in turn, promoting the creation of digital identities.

1. Wires Around the World

The Internet was first developed in the late 1960s, and during the 1970s it began to show the earliest signs of its ability to network. However, we can actually date digital networking back 150 years. According to Martin Redfern, “The world’s first global communications system for exchanging text messages was neither the Internet nor the mobile phone,” but the telegraph. This was the first time in world history that rapid communication was made possible between vast distances. This network spread between America and Europe, and between Britain and its distant colonies, such as Australia. The telegraph was able to cut down average message travel time from 45 days to 24 hours.

If the invention of the telegraph was the birth of digital networking, then digital networking was conceived,

On an April day in 1746 at a grand convent of the Carthusians in Paris, with about two hundred monks who arranged themselves in a long, snaking line. Each monk held one end of a twenty-five-foot iron wire in each hand, connecting him to his neighbor on either side. Together, the monks and their connecting wires formed a line over a mile long. Once the line was complete, the abbe Jean-Antoine Nollet, a noted French scientist, took a primitive electrical battery and without warning, connected it to the line of monks—giving all of them a powerful electric shock... he [Nollet] was measuring the properties of electricity to find out how far it could be transmitted along wires and how fast it traveled. (Standage, 1998)

In a radio documentary produced by the BBC, Tom Standage commented on this event by saying, “This all sounds very silly, but is in fact extremely important because, firstly, they all said “ow” which showed that you were sending a signal right along the line; and

¹ In a presentation given by Jan Chipchase, he presents his research on what people carry, and he demonstrates that people consistently carry three items: keys, money, and mobile phone. The reason that individuals carry these is because they serve as survival tools. Chipchase then goes on to explore the mobile phone and states that it allows the user to transcend space and time. (Chipchase, 2007)

secondly, they all said “ow” at the same time, and that meant that you were sending the signal very quickly” (Redfern, 2005). Two hundred monks came together with one scientist, not knowing that they were laying the first foundations for ideas that would eventually lead to the telegraph, the Internet, and cyberspace. Cyberspace is a place where one user can interact with many others in order to achieve a common goal.

As time progressed, the wars in Europe and distant colonies created a demand for some type of communication system that could extend over great distances. There were a number of electrical systems that were proposed, but they were not very efficient. For example, two Englishmen named William Cooke and Charles Wheatstone came up with a telegraph that used five dials that were made to point at different letters. (Figure 1-1) This device used five wires and would have been quite expensive at the time to construct.

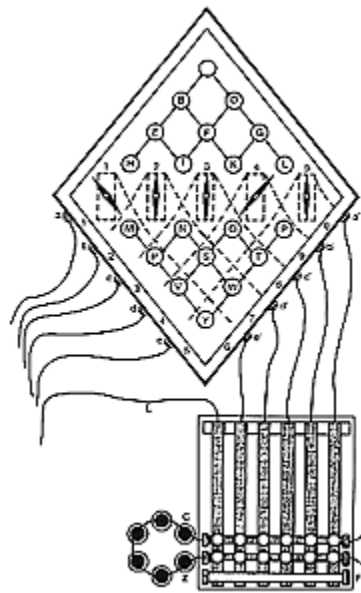


Figure 1-1

“Cooke and Wheatstone’s original five-needle electric telegraph. Each needle could be tilted to the left or right, or remain vertical; moving two needles picked out a letter on a diagonal grid (in this case, the letter ‘v’)” (Standage, 1998).

An American named Samuel Morse, hailed as the father of the telegraph, developed a device that only required one wire to send a code of dots and dashes, which became known as Morse code. This code was simple enough that many people were, and still are, able to become proficient in Morse code. With the establishment of this device and code structure, connecting distant places became much more feasible and also much more economical. Telegraph poles began sprouting up everywhere across America and Europe. In time, a proposition was put forth to connect the two continents by running a telegraph line along the bottom of the Atlantic. This task was attempted a number of times without success, and then in 1858 Queen Victoria was successful in sending a telegraph message to President Buchanan². “The Atlantic Telegraph - that instantaneous highway of thought between the Old and New Worlds -*Scientific America*, 1858” (Standage, 1998).

“Though its [telegraphs] business was the sending and receiving of messages, much like e-mail today, the actual operation of the telegraph had more in common with an on-line chat room” (Standage, 1998). The telegraph operators did not just send and receive these messages; in fact, there was quite a bit of “extra” communication that occurred over the telegraph lines. There were standard business interactions that related to having to call the central station, or even just in the asking to have a message repeated. The additional interactions over the wires allowed the telegraph operators to become adept at the skill of reading a message by just listening to it, and removed the arduous task of having to read dots and dashes that were printed on the paper tape. This skill

² “The Message of Queen Victoria to President Buchanan. To the Honorable President of the United States. Her Majesty desires to congratulate the President upon the successful completion of this great international work, in which the Queen has taken the deepest interest. [end of first paragraph]” (The New York Times, 1858)

encouraged increased social interactions between telegraph operators and other operators during quiet periods, when they would pass the time by playing chess, telling jokes or chatting. Since multiple stations would share one wire, many people would have the ability to participate in these social interactions.

What also makes the operation of a telegraph similar to an on-line chat room or an instant messaging program was the use of short abbreviations. These abbreviations allowed the operator to not have to labor in great detail to spell out every word letter by letter. Telegraph operators in the 1850s, like instant-messaging users of today, abbreviated commonly used phrases.

For example:

1850s (Standage, 1998)

II = "I Am Ready"
GA = "Go Ahead"
SFD = "Stop For Dinner"
GM= "Good Morning"
1 = "Wait A Moment"
2 = "Get Answer Immediately"
33 = "Answer Paid Here"

TODAY (www.netlingo.com/emailsh.cfm)

BRB = "Be Right Back"
TTYL = "Talk To You Later"
LOL = "Laugh Out Loud"
B4N = "Bye For Now"
BFF = "Best Friends Forever"
H/P = "Hold Please"
J/K = "Just Kidding"

However, unlike current digital technologies, the telegraph did not require the user (the sender or the receiver of the message) to own any special equipment or have any in-depth understanding of how to operate the technology. Despite its simplicity, the system still confused many users. Moreover, sending a message was costly, only the wealthy used the telegraph widely. Most used it only for extremely important messages. The divide of the telegraph community was minimized in the 1870s with automatic telegraph. Alexander Graham Bell's invention, the telephone, shrank the divide even more dramatically with. "No skilled operator required; direct conversation may be had by speech without the intervention of a third person. The communication is much more rapid, the average number of words being transmitted by Morse Sounder being from

fifteen to twenty per minute, by Telephone from one to two hundred. No experience required either for its operation, maintenance, or repair. It needs no battery and has no complicated machinery. It is unsurpassed for economy and simplicity –*Bell Telephone Company*” (Standage, 1998). This new device that allowed a user to have access to the digital realm did it in a manner that also allowed users to cross the digital divide: hence, it was user-friendly.

Humans are social creatures, because of this we strive to make contact with our fellow creatures. We use the advancements in technology as tools to make the connections with our fellow creatures, whether it is done in a digital or physical form. To these technologies we inherently bring human nature, which is “the hype, skepticism, and bewilderment associated with the Internet—concerns about new forms of crime, adjustments in social mores, and redefinition of business practices - mirroring the hopes, fears, and misunderstandings inspired by the telegraph” (Standage, 1998). The smaller the divide becomes, and the greater the number of individuals that participate with these new technologies, the bigger an impact “human nature” will have on the continued growth of these technologies.

2. The Modern Digital Network (Cyberspace)

In the initial stages of the Internet, the social networking capabilities were much like those of the telegraph; they were reserved for the elite owners/users of the technology. Users first needed the equipment and then the knowledge of the workings of the equipment in order to be able to access the Internet. Once they had this equipment, they still needed to obtain an Internet connection, and once they gained access to

cyberspace, the users then needed to navigate throughout it. This digital divide between the Internet elite and the potential everyday user began to shrink in the late 1990s. With the development of the social networking site, the first recognizable social networking site being SixDegrees.com³, users were now able to enter cyberspace in a more user-friendly interface design.

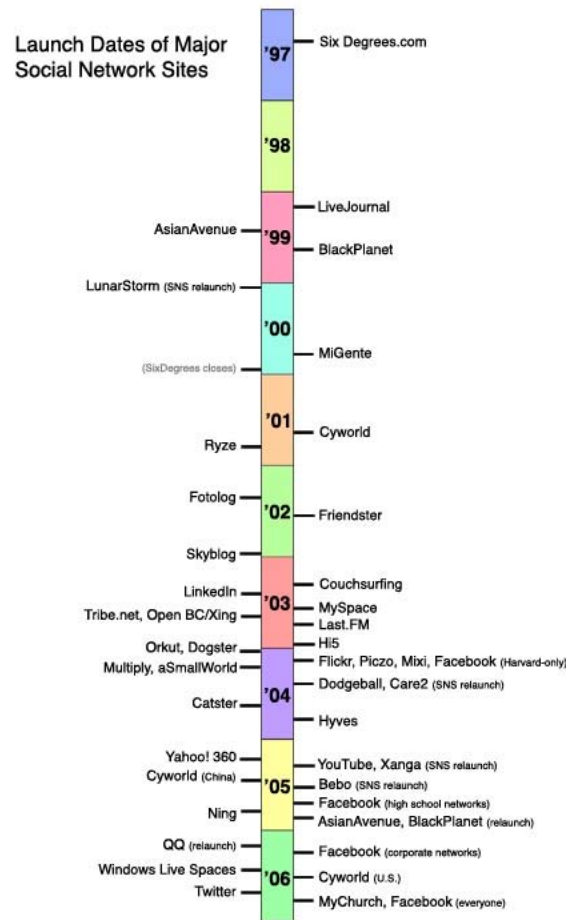


Figure 1-2
Timeline of the launch dates of many major SNSs and dates when community sites re-launched with SNS features (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

³ SixDegrees.com was a social network service website that lasted from 1997 to 2001 and was based on the *Web of Contacts* model of social networking. It was named after the six degrees of separation concept, which was made popular by the American playwright, John Guare. The site allowed users to list friends, family members and acquaintances both on the site and externally; external contacts were invited to join the site. Users could send messages and post bulletin board items to people in their first, second, and third degrees, and see their connection to any other user on the site. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SixDegrees.com)

A few more social networking sites were launched after the creation of SixDegrees.com, but these sites were not seeing dramatic use by the public until 2002, when Friendster⁴ was launched. “[Friendster] was designed to compete with Match.com⁵, a profitable online dating site. While most dating sites focused on introducing people to strangers with similar interests, Friendster was designed to help friends-of-friends meet, based on the assumption that friends-of-friends would make better romantic partners than would strangers” (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The first participants to shape the dynamics of Friendster were bloggers, attendees of the Burning Man⁶ arts festival, and gay men (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Before this site received any press coverage it had already grown to 300,000 users via word-of-mouth promotion only. “Organic growth had been critical to creating a coherent community” (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In May of 2003, the success that Friendster was having in cyberspace finally became known to mainstream media. The number of users problematically increased, almost overnight. “The onslaught of new users who learned about the site from media coverage upset the cultural balance. Furthermore, exponential growth meant a collapse in social contexts” (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This insurgence of new users not only affected the content and participation of users on Friendster, but it also bogged down the hardware that supported the site.

⁴ Friendster is an Internet social network service. The Friendster site was founded in Mountain View, California, United States by Jonathan Abrams in March 2002 and is privately owned. Friendster is based on the Circle of Friends and Web of Friends techniques for networking individuals in virtual communities and demonstrates the small world phenomenon. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friendster)

⁵ Match.com is an online dating service.

⁶ Burning Man is an eight-day annual event that takes place in Black Rock City, a temporary city on the playa of the Black Rock Desert in the U.S. state of Nevada, 90 miles (150 km) north-northeast of Reno, ending on the American Labor Day holiday in September. The event is described by organizers as an experiment in community, radical self-expression, and radical self-indulgence and takes its name from the ritual burning of a large wooden effigy on Saturday evening. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burning_Man)

Users of Friendster started to collect “friends” on a massive scale. “The initial design of Friendster restricted users from viewing profiles of people who were more than four degrees away (friends-of-friends-of-friends-of-friends)” (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In order to expand their reach and their ability to view other profiles, users started adding acquaintances and interesting-looking strangers to their “friends” list. The biggest culprit of large-scale “friend” collecting was done by fake profiles. These “Fakesters” would represent iconic fictional characters, such as celebrities (dead or alive), concepts, and other such entities. The majority of users did not participate in the creation of a “Fakester,” but they did enjoy browsing the fake profiles for entertainment purposes or to find other users that they knew (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This Fakester identity phenomenon, outraged the developers of Friendster, and they attempted to delete the fake profiles.

The substantial influx of participants to Friendster in 2003 did not only encourage new dynamics of participation; it also inspired a boom of new similar social networking sites. Some of the most noteworthy social networking sites that have been launched since 2003 are MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, and Facebook. All of these sites have different features that set them apart from the rest, in their pursuit to gain the most users. However, even though social networking sites have their various differences, “most took the form of the profile-centric sites, trying to replicate the early success of Friendster or to target specific demographics” (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

These profile-centric sites allowed users to provide user-generated content, whether it was in the form of a text, video, or photo, in order to generate a graphical interface that would act as the user’s digital identity. The development of social

networking sites allowed those with minimal Internet knowledge not only the ability to participate but also the ability to participate thoroughly, due to their innate user-friendliness. Instead of designing and programming a personal home page or blog, all a user had to do on a social networking site was to create a profile. The user-friendliness aspect of these sites combined with the public's increased familiarity with the Internet could explain the dramatic increase in demand to participate and shape the digital realm of cyberspace.

3. Making a Decision on Graphical Representaion

If a user is more technologically literate, they may decide to extend their digital identity outside of the creative restrictions of a social networking site. By creating a personal homepage, the user has the freedom to create any graphical interface that they envision for their digital identity, limited only by their knowledge of programming, and they do not have to conform to the restrictions of the profile settings that most social networking sites impose.

“Thomas Erickson notes that ‘personal homepages and the World-Wide Web are not being used to publish information’; they are being used to construct identity - useful information is just a side effect. He adds that ‘the World-Wide Web is one of the first venues where individuals can construct portrayals of themselves using information rather than consumer goods as their palette’” (Chandler, 1998). The Internet does provide a vast and ever-changing source of information, and users are utilizing this information to establish an identity in cyberspace. As the user's grasp of this information grows, henceforth so does their digital identity. Many times, upon first visiting a website, the

home page may display the words ‘under construction,’ which may imply more than the technical construction of the site itself: “Personal homepages can be seen as reflecting the construction of their makers’ identities” (Chandler, 1998).

Daniel Chandler goes on to state that a personal homepage is comparable to that of a “bedroom wall of young people in the West” (Chandler, 1998). Cyberspace is a world that is shifting the concept of identity away from the “presentation of self in everyday life” (Goffman, 1969). Because of the many different ways that a user can represent themselves with graphics, text, music, video, etc., the presentation of self in cyberspace is more similar to the idea of a “bedroom wall of young people in the West.” The reason for this is that generally these “bedroom walls” which Chandler references would be covered with materials such as posters, postcards, photos, sport memorabilia, etc., things that would constantly be changing or added to as the owner of the wall gained more knowledge and life experiences. The advancement of a graphical interpretation of a digital self has shifted the idea of the decorated “bedroom wall” from a private communication of self to a public communication of self. The idea of “room decoration” that defines an identity has also been embraced by the social networking site Habbo⁷.

It is this shift from private to public that first generates a virtual identity. “Virtual selves have existed ever since people have been publishing their writing” (Chandler, 1998). This “one-to-many” communication style was exponentially enhanced with the introduction of the digital world, which the Internet provided. This “virtual identity” then

⁷ Habbo, formerly Habbo Hotel, features chat rooms rendered by isometric projection in the form of virtual hotel rooms. User pages on the website are linked to these rooms and allow users to share content and create groups with discussion forums. Each user, called a Habbo, has a customizable avatar to represent him or herself. The service gains revenue from credits bought with real-life currency. Credits are used to buy products such as virtual furniture for the virtual hotel rooms and stickers for user pages (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habbo).

metamorphosed to become a “digital identity.” This is because “web pages offer the potential for mass communication in a medium which, despite far from universal access, is incalculably more widely-accessible for self-presentation than conventional print publishing and the traditional mass media” (Chandler, 1998). This medium, unlike mass media, allows consumers to be producers and producers to be consumers, on a massive scale.

With the vast scope of cyberspace, people often comment about personal homepages, and other digital identity forming tools on the Internet, as synchronous forms of communication, when in fact, excluding chat engines, there is no real-time communication taking place (for example, a face-to-face conversation). Because of the mode in which users participate in the digital world and their time spent there, this asynchronous communication form has the ability to almost identically simulate a synchronous communication form, especially if the user’s digital identity has a blog, which makes it even easier for users to frequently interact with each other. It can be said that the homepages “mediatively interact with other people in [the user’s] absence” (Chandler, 1998).

Having a homepage, in addition to possessing a profile on a social networking site, allows a user to distinctively manage and manipulate their digital identity. Like a profile in a social networking site, a personal homepage represents a series of conscious decisions that the user made to represent themselves in cyberspace. “The Web might encourage conscious and deliberate social practices of self presentation” (Chandler, 1998). Every contribution a user makes to their digital identity is the result of a conscious decision to include or exclude particular information pertinent to their digital

identity. “A person manages identity by deliberately exhibiting and withholding pieces of social information, for the purpose of influencing the perceptions of others towards that person” (Chandler, 1998). Personal homepages usually include ties to a user’s real-life, or are directly influenced by the user’s real-life. It is these ties, such as photos, e-mail addresses, links, etc., that attempt to enmesh the real-life identity with the digital identity, which essentially serves as the interpretation of the real digital identity.

4. Friend Collection: Displays of Connections

The part of the online world that has been formed by the many social networking tools available on the Internet is often considered to be a social space by its users. The way that these tools are set up, especially in regards to social networking sites, makes it very easy to find connections with other users in cyberspace. This is because when users create a unique digital identity they must distinguish themselves from others by providing information about their physical appearance, interests, hobbies, beliefs, connections, and any other information that they believe makes them who they are. The information that users provide to develop their digital identity is the same information that is used to make it easier for users to find other digital identities to connect to. By then making a connection to another profile, the user is extending their reach into the digital realm. The larger the number of connections a digital identity makes with other users, the greater the credibility of that digital identity. “There are societies in which network ties reflect a rigid hierarchy and close kinship relationships, and others in which they reflect a mobile culture structured around work and school” (boyd & Donath, 2004).

The more user-friendly social networking sites are, “Online environments in which people create a self-descriptive profile and then make connections to other people they know on the site, creating a network of personal connections. Participants in social networking sites are usually identified by their real names and often include photographs; their network of connections is displayed as an integral piece of their self-presentation” (boyd & Donath, 2004). What boyd and Donath are saying is that digital identities are not just determined by the graphical interface, or profile, that a user sets up, but that it is also the “network of connections”, or the other digital identities that the user is connected to, which also defines the digital identity. The authors go on to say that “On-line, identity is mutable and unanchored by the body that is its locus in the real world” (boyd & Donath, 2004). This comment suggests that a digital identity is not grounded by a physical body, which is the obvious case in the real-world, and that the display of connections provides some sort of grounding or reliability for the user’s claims about themselves.

The theory, argued by boyd and Donath, is that displays of connections should ensure self-presentation, because both individuals have approved of the digital identities by linking with each other. This link between profiles represents the sanction they have given to each other’s digital identity, acknowledging the other identity and therefore confirming its existence. As a result, the more “friends” that a digital identity has collected can only serve to make that digital identity much more credible in its existence.

What is the Point?

Finding a Reason behind the Participation

In recent years, social networking sites have become some of the most frequented online destinations on the Internet (comScore, 2007, 2008). As the popularity of these sites has increased, the opinions and views regarding these sites have also expanded to a much wider audience. In 1993, *The New Yorker* published the now classic cartoon (Figure 2-1) that proclaimed, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Steiner, 1993).



Figure 2-1

The cartoon by Peter Steiner, published in the July 5, 1993 issue of *The New Yorker*

This cartoon is “suggesting that identity was so hidden online that opportunities would be widely open to all, regardless of background characteristics that may have traditionally disadvantaged some people compared to others,” (Hargittai, 2007). This mode of thinking suggests that the Internet can transform or hide users’ real-world identities when generating and participating with their digital identity. Early research and observations, such as those of Sherry Turkle (1995), explored how users discard their real-world identity when they participate in cyberspace. “The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (Turkle, 1995). Current work, such as that of danah boyd (2007), suggests that real-world behavior does in fact influence the digital identity.

Digital embodiment requires writing yourself into being... this means an explicit articulation of who you are and how you relate to others, using the predefined mechanisms for expression. Through a series of forms, profiles must be crafted to express some aspect of identity and relationships must be explicitly acknowledged in order to exist within the system. Unlike everyday embodiment, there is no digital corporeality without articulation. One cannot simply ‘be’ online; one must make one’s presence visible through explicit and structured actions. (boyd, 2007)

Cyberspace has become much more user-friendly since 1993, and as a result it has opened its doors to a more extensive range of users. The increased numbers of users and the advances in the ways in which the users can participate in cyberspace have created a numerous varieties in which the digital identity can be developed, utilized, and viewed.

1. Considering the Activities of Users in Cyberspace

Published in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Eszter Hargittai stats, “Despite Internet user studies starting to focus on particular online behaviors, rather than considering all online actions to be uniform, categorizations of online activities have

remained relatively broad, making it difficult to understand who does what online, why, and how this influences the rest of people's lives" (Hargittai, 2007). The observation of who does what and why that will be presented here represents a questionnaire I distributed, that asked questions to social networking site users who range in age from 18 to 49. The results of this questionnaire will then be compared to results of surveys that look at the same information, in order to justify the observations that were concluded from the results of the questionnaire. These questions were posted on a website (SurveyMonkey.com), from August 2007 to January 2008, and distributed through the networking tools that cyberspace provides (i.e., blog, group e-mail lists, and social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook).

The purpose of the questionnaire was to evaluate the creators of digital identities in order to determine in what manner they were using their identities to participate in cyberspace. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions and took only a few minutes to complete. These questions were constructed in this format so that the respondent would be more inclined to contribute their time to complete this questionnaire. Also, the respondents answered these question on a completely anonymous basis. This questionnaire included questions regarding their utilization of social networking sites, such as experience, amount of use, total online activity, types of sites, and it also assessed their demographic background. The manner in which these questions were distributed garnered 118 respondents: 74 of the respondents were female, 36 were male, and 8 of the respondents did not provide a gender. The largest numbers of contributors to the survey were in the age range of 22-26, which is also known as Generation Y (52 users). The largest individual age group that responded to the survey was 20 years of age (17 users).

109 of the respondents provided their location and all of these users were from the United States, and in addition majority of those users were located in the northeast region of the United States.

The first question was exactly where users participated in cyberspace. The manner in which this questionnaire was distributed, via the networking channels of cyberspace, assured that the respondents all participated in cyberspace. 100 of the respondents answered that they were frequent participants (at least once a day) in cyberspace. Table 2-1 demonstrates where these users were spending their time while in cyberspace. According to these results, Facebook is the most popular social networking site, with 4 out of 5 respondents participating in this digital environment. MySpace came in second, with 3 out of 4 respondents participating in that particular digital environment. Comparing this observation of Table 2-1 to the results of a survey (Table 2-2) that was published in a paper by Eszter Hargittai in 2007⁸, the results in Table 2-2 also show that Facebook and MySpace were the most popular social networking sites in Hargittai's pool of respondents.

⁸ "The analyses presented here are based on data representing a diverse group of mainly 18- and 19-year-old college students. The study was conducted in February and March of 2007 at the University of Illinois, Chicago, which is a U.S. urban public research university... The 1,060 first-year students included in these analyses represent a diverse group of people. Fifty-six percent of the respondents are female, 44% are male. Almost all are 18 or 19 years old, with a mean age of 18.4 and a median of 18. Fewer than half are White and non-Hispanic. Slightly less than 8% claim African or African-American descent, almost 30% are of Asian or Asian American ancestry, and just under one-fifth are of Hispanic origin. These students come from varied family backgrounds. Over a quarter of respondents have parents whose highest level of education is high school, with an additional 20% whose parents do not have a college degree. While it may seem that sampling from a college population assumes a highly educated group, 25% of first-years at this university drop out of college by their second year (Ardinger et al., 2004) and fewer than half (43.6%) will graduate within six years of enrollment (University of Illinois-Chicago, 2004). Unlike many U.S. colleges, over half of the students at this university commute from home and live with their parents (53.1%)" (Hargittai, 2007).

Social Networking Usage

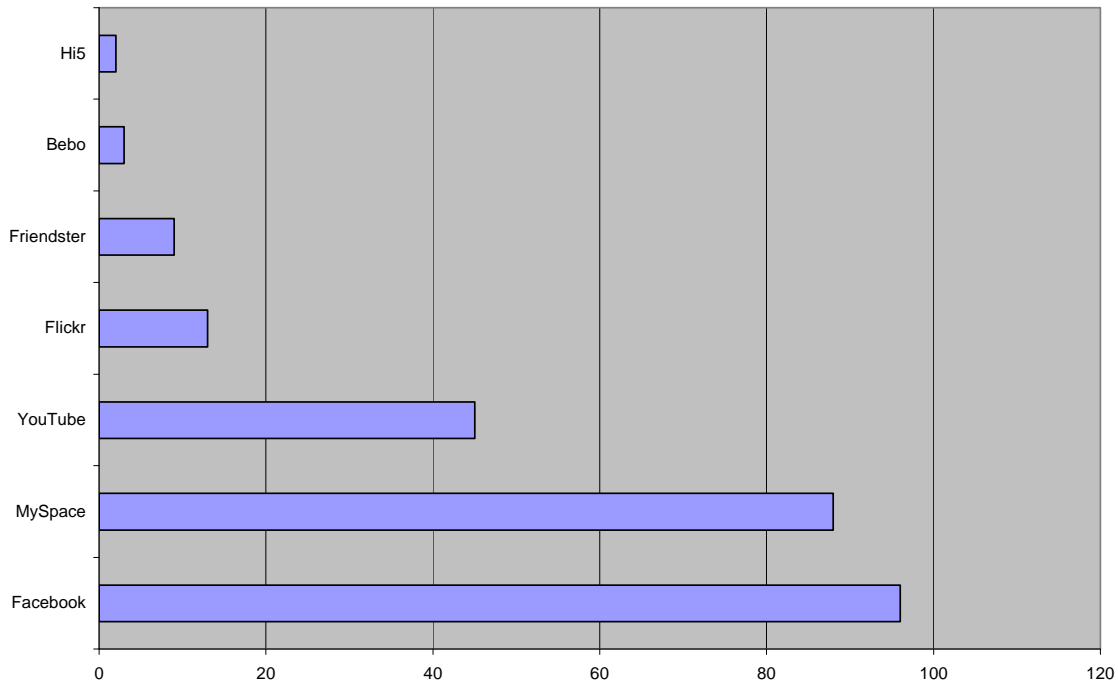


Table 2-1
Familiarity with social networking sites among survey participants.

| | uses it* | Has heard of it | Has never used it | Tried it once, but no more | Used to use it, no longer |
|------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Facebook | 78.8 (62.8) | 99.4 | 14.2 | 3.6 | 3.4 |
| MySpace | 54.6 (38.4) | 99.5 | 20.8 | 9.4 | 15.2 |
| Xanga | 6.2 (1.9) | 76.4 | 61.7 | 11.8 | 20.3 |
| Friendster | 3.3 (1.0) | 43.3 | 84.7 | 5.6 | 6.4 |
| Orkut | 1.6 (0.6) | 5.8 | 97.1 | 0.5 | 0.8 |
| Bebo | 0.6 (0.0) | 9.6 | 95.4 | 2.8 | 1.2 |

Table 2-2
Familiarity and experience with social network sites among participants (percentages) (Hargittai, 2007)
Notes: * These figures summarize the percentage of students who currently use the site "sometimes" and "often." Figures for those reporting use of the site *often* are in parentheses.

The information that is displayed in Figure 2-2, on the following page, shows that the information that was presented in Hargittai's survey and the informal questionnaire

may be biased to the country or region in which the respondents live; this information implies that even though cyberspace is interconnected it can also be segregated by the specific social networking site on which users choose to spend a majority of their time.

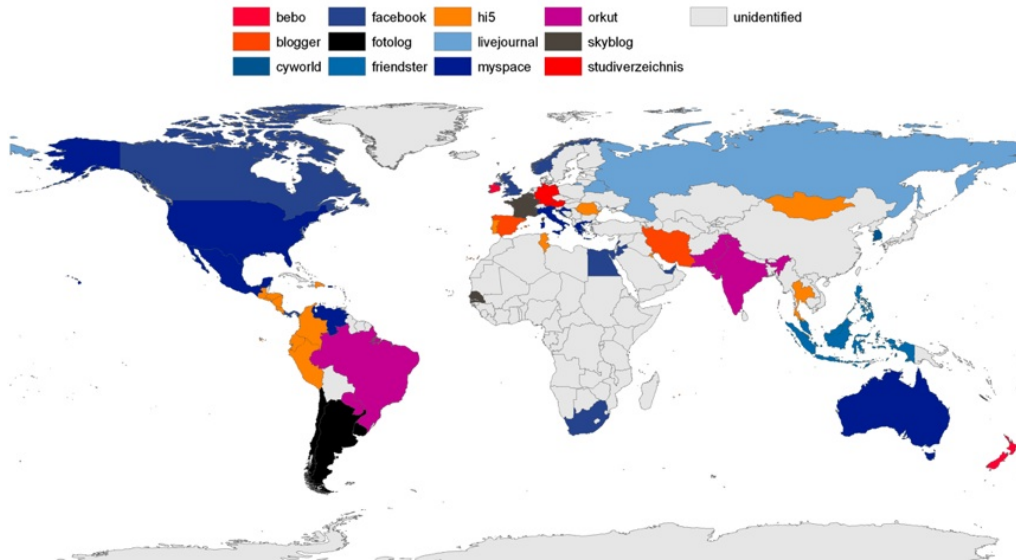


Figure 2-2

A map of the world, showing the dominant social networks by country, according to Alexa⁹ (www.valleywag.com).

This trend that exists, where different areas of the world use different social networking sites, can be explained with the knowledge of why people feel the need to participate in cyberspace. The respondents of the questionnaire (Table 2-3) were given a choice of 12 reasons that a user may possibly have for participating in cyberspace, and 100 of the respondents selected “Connecting to Old Friends” as their reason for participating. There were similar findings presented in a survey (Table 2-4) conducted by Trebor Scholz¹⁰, in which the majority of respondents replied that they participate in

⁹ Alexa Internet, Inc. is a California-based subsidiary company of Amazon.com that is best known for operating a website that provides information on web traffic to other websites.

¹⁰ “In order to find analyze current trends with more authority, the author conducted a survey and 297 people responded (80.8% finishing rate). This is a large enough number of respondents to speak to trends in participatory behavior. 56.3% (143) of respondents were male and 42.5% female (108). 1.2% (3) stated their gender as “other.” The largest number of contributors to this survey was 29 years old (16 users) but all ages from 15 to over 60 years old were represented” (Scholz, 2007).

cyberspace in order to connect with others. In order to establish this connection, whether it is made with people the user does or does not already know, the user has to search the sites where their real-world friends or potential friends are located in cyberspace. For example, if a number of your friends have started a profile on Facebook, and if you are interested in participating with these real-world friends in cyberspace, then you will need to join the same social networking site that your friends belong to. A good example of how social networking sites gain popularity in particular areas of the world would be that of Friendster. “Friendster launched in the fall of 2002 with only a word-of-mouth publicity strategy: Its developers told their friends, who told their friends, and so on. On June 4, 2003 the *Village Voice* ran the first major article on Friendster. By then, Friendster had more than 300,000 users. By October 2003, more than 3.3 million Friendster accounts were registered” (boyd, 2007). This demonstrates how different areas of the world can dominate particular social networking sites, because of word-of-mouth promotions and local media assistance.

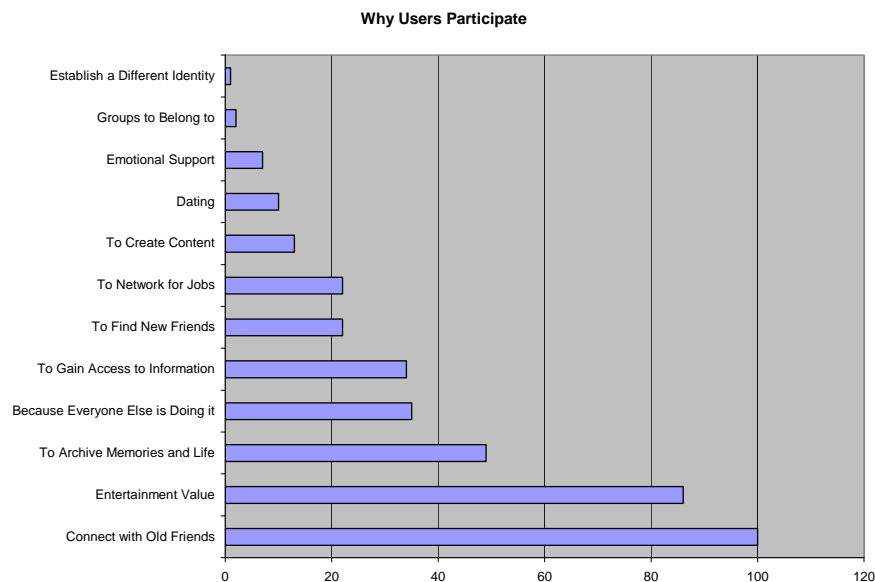


Table 2-3.
Reasons that users provided as to why they participate in cyberspace.

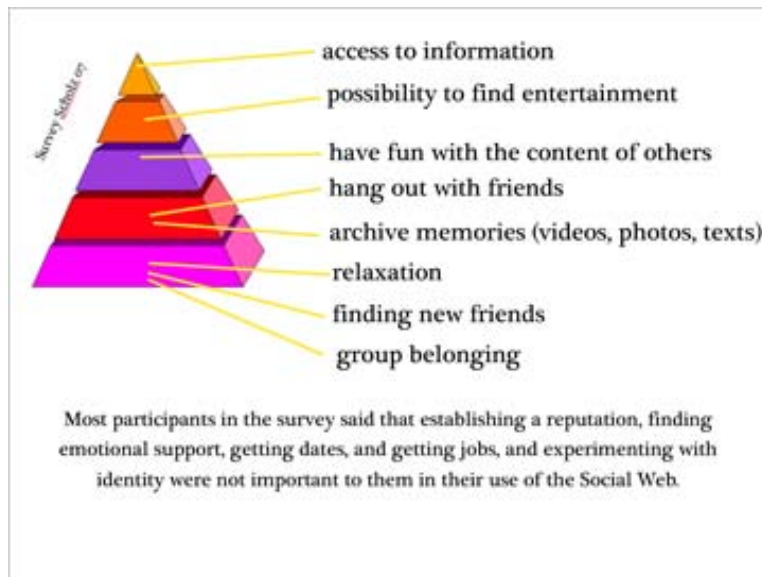


Table 2-4

Reasons participants gave for utilizing the social web (Scholz, 2007).

The questionnaire also explored how much time users have invested in their digital identities. 110 of the respondents have at least one year of experience managing a digital identity, and 36 of the respondents have had a digital identity for five or more years. Looking a little closer, Table 2-5 reveals that logging in to cyberspace is a daily occurrence for users. 100 of the respondents said that they participate at least once a day, and 47 of the questionnaire respondents also said that they participate for one hour or more. Referring to the work of Hargittai (Table 2-6), “On the average, participants have access to the Internet at over six locations and have been users for over six years... When asked how often they go online, the vast majority report doing so several times a day. They estimate spending 15.5 hours visiting Web sites weekly (2.21 hours daily)” (Hargittai, 2007).

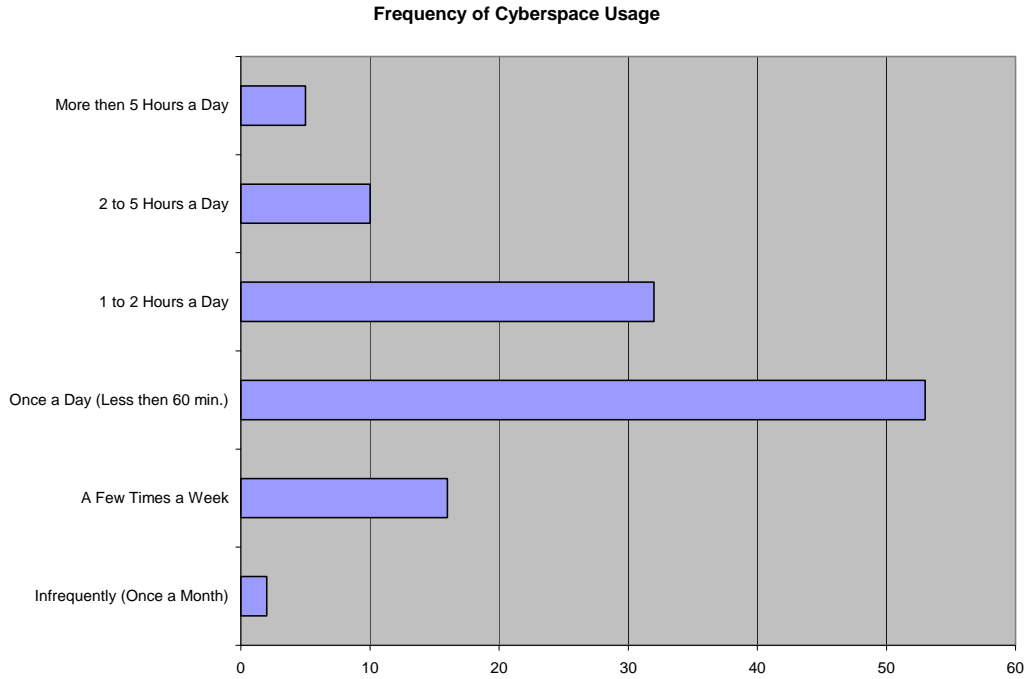


Table 2-5
Amount of time users said that they spend in cyberspace.

| | Mean | Standard deviation |
|-------------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Number of Internet access locations | 6.2 | (2.1) |
| Number of Internet use years | 6.4 | (2.0) |
| Number of hours on the Web weekly* | 15.5 | (10.0) |

Table 2-6.

Basic IT access and use statistics for sample participants (Hargittai, 2007).

Note: * This measure only concerns Web use and excludes time spent on email, chat, or VoIP.

Unlike the real-world, cyberspace allows users to have more than one identity. Whether users are solely focusing on different parts of their personality or creating an identity that is totally different from that of the one they maintain in the real-world, the user is making a choice of how they want to be portrayed in cyberspace. When asked how many digital identities a user has in cyberspace (Table 2-7), 73 of the respondents

said that they maintain just one digital identity. That leaves 43 of the respondents that reported that they maintain two or more digital identities, and 9 actually maintained five or more digital identities. There seems to be a median of 43 to 47 of the respondents that are more experienced users. What makes them more experienced is the fact that the users have spent substantial time in cyberspace and also have more than one digital identity. From this information, the conclusion can be drawn that the more active a user is in cyberspace the more dynamic their participation becomes in cyberspace.

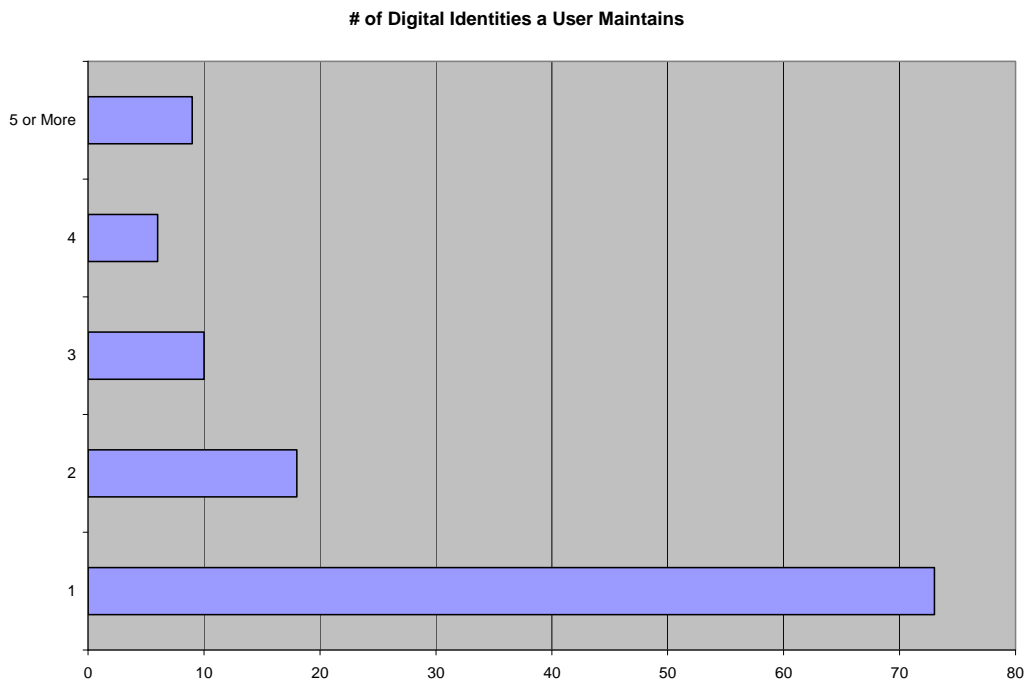


Table 2-7
The number of digital identities that users said that they maintain.

What the results of this questionnaire also showed was that users make a conscious choice in what material they want to provide to cyberspace in order to establish a digital identity. When asked to provide anonymous comments on how the user creates their digital identity, this question had only 53 of 118 participants respond, and the

majority of the responses referred to the fact that they were just portraying themselves in cyberspace as they are in the real-world; for example, “It is the same as my actual identity.” Even though the majority of respondents to this question answered in a manner that states the user is simply reflecting their real-world identity in cyberspace, there were a number of respondents that contributed a more elaborate response, so that one would question if a real-world identity could even truly exist in cyberspace.

For example:

- “My digital identity is the most favorable/least embarrassing version of myself”
- “It is the real me minus the drama”
- “I made it appear as I would like to appear myself”
- “I try to make my digital identity a reflection of the best parts of myself”

From these responses it would seem that conscious decisions are being made when deciding how to present one’s self in cyberspace. It is these conscious decisions that do not allow for the digital identity to be true to the real-world identity. Because the subconscious is not present in cyberspace, a person’s real-world identity can only serve as an inspiration when they are developing their digital identity. The more access a user has to their digital identity, the more dynamic and developed that digital identity can become. From this information, one could theorize that the only way to achieve a real-world identity in cyberspace would be for the user to have access to their digital identity on a constant, continual, and never-ending basis.

2. Case Study: Ysabella Brave



Figure 2-7 Screen shot of Ysabella Brave's profile page on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave>)

Ysabella Brave was used for this case study because she is a prime example of a “real” identity in cyberspace. She claims to be nothing but herself, and her fans celebrate her for that. Ysabella Brave (real name: MaryAnne Ysabella) is an American vocalist who gained notoriety via the social networking site YouTube, after joining it on March 1, 2006 (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ysabella_Brave). It was her participation on two YouTube channels, [ysabellabrave](http://www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave) (<http://www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave>) and [ysabellabravetalk](http://www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabravetalk) (<http://www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabravetalk>), which led to her discovery by Cordless Recordings, a division of Warner Music Group.

Ysabella posted the first video of herself singing on July 14, 2006 (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ysabella_Brave). In her videos she covers a wide range of genres, such as blues, jazz, the great American Songbook, rock, soul, R&B, pop, and even some of her own original material. Since she began contributing to YouTube, she has posted 115 videos of herself. The conclusion can be made that it is her genre

versatility and extensive amount of content that has had the most substantial impact on her popularity. All of these 115 posts are exclusive to her YouTube channel, ysabellabrave. On Ysabella's other YouTube channel, ysabellabravetalk, she has provided 27 video posts, in which the content is less about singing and focuses more on her thoughts and opinions. She continues to be a prolific provider of content on YouTube, and between her two channels she has contributed 142 videos. In addition, her channels have been viewed 1,791,066 times (as of December 4, 2007). From Ysabella's two YouTube channels, her digital identity has also branched into MySpace and in addition she has created her own community website, www.ysabellabrave.com.

Ysabella not only provides considerable amounts of content, but she also has regular interaction with her audience via e-mail and responses to comments posted on her pages. This interaction with the viewers allows Ysabella to establish a connection with her audience, which is an extremely effective way to establish and maintain a viewer base. "Individuals are most likely to engage in such creative network manipulation in situations where relationships involve a high proportion of their time, effort and emotion, and where the relationships are based on compatible foci" (boyd & Donath, 2004). Viewers seem to be attracted to her singing abilities, as well as the fact that she is very charismatic and viewers find inspiration in her.

Hi everyone! New to the scene - just a brief message of gratitude to Ysabella. It is refreshing to find an ambitious, yet socially gracious individual who is willing to risk criticism (for better or worse), in order to share with us a sense of genuine enthusiasm about life. Ysabella, thank you for putting yourself out there. Cheers! (www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave)

cuz the charisma, character and open goodness you portray would make it a smash hit. It would be so refreshing to see amateur talent appearing on your show, talk show hostess /move over Oprah. I believe you're a genuine inspiration to many, lets see who they are on national tv... ex producers u listening? ;) (www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave)

The manner in which Ysabella has portrayed herself digitally is what attracts viewers. Ysabella's digital identity can be viewed as a "real" digital identity. Ysabella would also confess to the realism of her digital identity, "I am only who I am... I am not different on the computer than I am in real life" (e-mail message 12-19-07). It appears that Ysabella uses her real-world identity as an inspiration when she develops her digital identity. Because of the diverse content that Ysabella has created to represent herself in cyberspace, it has exposed her identity to other users that might otherwise never have discovered her.

I stumbled on to her while looking for Cole Porter and Frank Sinatra videos on You Tube (no, I'm not gay, just appreciate that genre.)
(www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave)

Just discovered you on YouTube. Love your style and you have the perfect face to go with it. I was scanning Hootchie Cootchie Man videos when I found yours and had to check out the rest of your stuff. Anyway, Happy Birthday and may you enjoy lots of happiness this year. It is her mass amount of content and wide range of genres/covers that she has performed that has attracted people to her channels that were not even originally searching for her content specifically.
(www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave)

When providing her content, Ysabella had to make a conscious decision as to what she was going to perform, how it was going to be performed, where the camera would be set up, etc. Every part of the participation process in cyberspace stems from conscious decisions that are made by the users. Another example of this type of decision making is present in something as simple as creating a screen/user name. Ysabella Brave generated her screen name from the nickname that her father gave her when she was young. Ysabella refers to her real-world last name (MaryAnne Ysabella), and Brave refers to her Native American heritage.

In order for a digital identity to not only be created, but also to thrive, the user has to provide a variety of content. With an increase in participation the user will feel more

comfortable in cyberspace, and as a result they will provide more user-generated content that will assist the development of their digital identity. “The performance of identity relies on the active interpretation of social contexts. Familiarity with a context increases a person’s ability to navigate it – to understand what is appropriate or advantageous within it – and thereby shapes choices about the persona one tries to present within it” (boyd, 2007). In the case of Ysabella Brave, she has created a digital identity that is charismatic, talented, kind, ambitious and brave. It is these characteristics to which her fans have attached themselves. Her digital identity can be summed up with a quote that she used to define herself on her YouTube channel, ysabellabrave.

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat. --Theodore Roosevelt
(www.youtube.com/user/ysabellabrave)

It is the conscious decisions that users make which generates their digital identity, and it is this same decision process that allows the user the freedom to base their digital identity on their real-world identity, or to create a fakester identity.

3. Case Study: Fake Steve Jobs



Figure 2-8 Screen shot of the blog by the Fake Steve Jobs (<http://fakesteve.blogspot.com/>).

Not all digital identities are inspired by the user's real-world life. Some are loosely based around a real famous person, but the content is fictional. A good example of a fake digital identity, or fakester, is a blog entitled *The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs*, and for those that do not know, Steve Jobs is the CEO of Apple. On this blog the author misrepresented himself as Steve Jobs, and wrote the blog from Steve Jobs' so-called point of view. This digital identity does not hide the fact that it is a fakester, which is exactly why this identity was selected as a case study. It is a prime example of what we can consider a "fake" identity.

The anonymous author was eventually discovered to be senior editor of *Forbes* magazine, Daniel Lyons. The discovery took place when Lyons was in the process of getting his latest book, *Options: The Secret Life of Steve Jobs, a Parody* (2007), published. Lyons started this blog in 2006, and in an interview Lyons shared how he came up with the idea for Fake Steve Jobs. "I thought, wouldn't it be funny if a CEO kept

a blog that really told you what he thought? That was the gist of it” (Smith, 2008). Lyons was exposed by the *New York Times*’ Brad Stone. After his real identity was uncovered, an outed Lyons wrote, “Well, tip of the hat to you, Brad Stone... Now you’ve ruined the mystery of Fake Steve, robbing thousands of people around the world of their sense of childlike wonder. Hope you feel good about yourself, you mangina” (Stone, 2008). The site is reported to have received about 700,000 visitors in a month, and Lyons has said that he receives about 50 e-mails a day, many of which pertain to ideas for new posts (Stone, 2008). This demonstrates that this is a highly active blog, regardless of the fact that people may have known it was a fakester the entire time. However, until Lyons’ identity was revealed, the “childlike wonder” that readers possessed still existed when engaging with the fakester identity, and many of the readers were disappointed with the truth. Just take a look at some of the comments that were left the day that Lyons broke the news on the fakester blog.

August 5, 2007 (The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs, 2008)

Anonymous said...

Thanks for memories FSJ, I'd always secretly hoped you'd turn out to be Real Steve Jobs playing an elaborate hoax on us all.

The Slick One said...

I had a feeling that when the real identity was revealed, I would have never heard of the person before.

Oh hey, I was right.

My hat's off to you, sir. This is a quality blog, and there is just no way it can be the same from now on.

What a stupid bradstone-head.

Anonymous said...

Damn.... I always secretly hoped that FSJ was in fact the RSJ.

I know, there'd be legal problems with 'forward-looking statements' and all that crap, but I still enjoyed the remote possibility.

A hex on you and your joyless heart, Brad Stone!

In addition to Fake Steve Jobs, Lyons also maintained another coexisting digital identity, in blog form (floatingpoint.wordpress.com). In Lyons' other blog, FloatingPoint, the user-generated content that is provided is a similar fashion to the content that Ysabella Brave generated. The digital identities Ysabella Brave and FloatingPoint are similar in that the content that makes up each digital identity is inspired from the user's real-world identity. After comparing both of Lyons' digital identities, Fake Steve Jobs and FloatingPoint, they demonstrate two distinctive tones and approaches to the media form, and they do establish digital identities that are completely detached from each other. As a result, Lyons has demonstrated that one real-world identity can support multiple cyberspace identities.

Like other digital identities in cyberspace, Fake Steve Jobs relies on interaction from other users in cyberspace in order to grow and develop. As cyberspace participates with the Fake Steve Jobs, the participants are (now) fully aware that the digital identity of The Fake Steve Jobs is a fictitious digital identity, or fakester. "It's a comic strip", as Lyons put it (Stone, 2008). This "comic strip" receives substantial input from cyberspace, which in turn creates a vested interest in the fakester from the users in cyberspace. "People connected to Fakesters as a way of enriching their own performances and in order to signal interests or tastes to others... Fakesters were a way of 'haking' the system to introduce missing social texture... The vast majority of Fakesters were exercises in creative and usually playful expression" (boyd, 2007). The Fake Steve Jobs identity was an identity in which people got wrapped up in the "childlike wonder" that came with not knowing the creator. After the user behind The Fake Steve Jobs was discovered, it can be suggested that it is the vested interest that was initially established

by the curiosity of other users that allowed the fakester to continue to maintain an active and participatory audience in cyberspace.

If we refer back to the section that discusses the theory on displays of connections (pg. 20), and apply this theory to the Fakester identities such as the Fake Steve Jobs, it would appear that in cyberspace the Fakester identities may actually be regarded as more credible than the digital identities that are genuinely based on a user's real life. One of the biggest reasons for this is because these Fakester identities have a tendency to be very popular and have many "friends," or connections. A more popular digital identity such as a Fakester would, in accordance with boyd and Donath's theory, in turn be considered a credible digital profile because of its prevailing acceptance by the users of the digital world.

The Cyborg in Cyberspace

Interacting Through Technology

“A rapidly expanding system of networks, collectively known as the Internet, links millions of people together in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities. In cyberspace, we are learning to live in virtual worlds. We may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries, and engineer virtual skyscrapers. But increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well” (Turkle, 1995). It is this constant and continually increasing presence of other people in cyberspace that sustains a dynamic social Web. The way in which cyberspace grows is dependent on the users and their unique uses for the social Web. As a user develops their own digital identity by providing user-generated content, they are contributing to the social Web and in turn they are influencing how cyberspace is developed. The dramatic insurgence of users over the last few years has created a demand by people to participate in cyberspace, and as a result more interactive spaces, such as social networking sites, are being created. “Cyberspace worlds can be inhabited by communities, in the process of articulating a cyberspace system, engineers must model cognition and community; and because communities are inhabited by bodies, they must model bodies as well... They

[engineers] are articulating their own assumptions about bodies and sociality and projecting them onto the codes that define cyberspace systems” (Stone, 1991).

In order to produce content for cyberspace, users are dependent on technology. This relationship between the user and technology is one of a symbiotic nature. The user requires a computing device to log in to cyberspace; to manage any form of a digital identity, without the assistance of technology, would be impossible. It is this cyborg relationship, between the user and technology, which has a direct effect on transforming a real-world identity to a digital identity. As a result, cyberspace is developed by the cyborg-altered digital identity, thereby making cyberspace a cyborg-altered world.

1. Group Dynamics in Relation to Cyberspace

Cyberspace is the part of the Internet where a user finds and interacts with other users. A common method in which users connect with other users is through their commonalities, i.e. mutual friends, similar interests, the same physical location, etc. “After joining a social network site, users are prompted to identify others in the system with whom they have a relationship. The label for these relationships differs depending on the site—popular terms include ‘Friends,’ ‘Contacts,’ and ‘Fans’ ... The term ‘Friends’ can be misleading, because the connection does not necessarily mean friendship in the everyday vernacular sense, and the reasons people connect are varied” (boyd & Ellison, 2007). It is through these commonalities that users will find themselves interacting with multiple users, a circumstance which can be viewed as a virtual group. “Defining the term *group* is difficult enough without prefacing it with the even more elusive *virtual* adjective... A group is a collection of two or more people who are interacting with and

influencing each other” (Wallace, 2001). Wallace explains that this definition of group is effective until you consider people in an elevator, theatre, or subway car. This is because you would not assume that in these group environments the people present are interacting, but if there is a sudden jerk in the elevator between floors, or the subway stops unexpectedly, or the theatre fire alarm goes off, the people in these environments will dramatically alter their interaction dynamics. “The amount of interaction among people who are in physical proximity can vary dramatically depending on the circumstances, and one small change in the environment could quickly turn a collection of individuals into something that fits neatly into the traditional definition for the word *group*” (Wallace, 2001). While in cyberspace, the user lacks the capability for a physical, or face-to-face, relationship that allows for dramatic degrees of interaction. However, cyberspace does allow for interaction and influence, and “those characteristics – interaction and influence – are the two that will be most useful as we try to understand the nature of online groups” (Wallace, 2001).

As cyberspace grows, so does the number of virtual groups that are present in cyberspace. These groups can range in size dramatically, depending on what the commonality is that brought the virtual group together in the first place. This ability to find or establish nearly any type of group can be suggested as a reason for the rapid growth of these online communities. “The fact that humans tend to conform to group norms may be one of the key reasons Internet communities continue to thrive and flourish” (Wallace, 2001). We can assume it is effortless to conform to a group that is made up of other like-minded users. These various groups all share the commonality of cyberspace, the space in which they are interacting. Users are drawn to cyberspace,

because of their desire to connect with others, as demonstrated in the previous section. “In Frances Baker’s account, beginning in the 1600s in England, the body became progressively more hidden, first because of changing conventions of dress, later by conventions of special privacy” (Stone, 1991). In other words, as humans, we have isolated ourselves, but we still seek social interaction and that can be found in cyberspace. “There is a deep evolutionary expectation that as humans interact with other human beings and their environment, certain development responses are triggered... to provide the requisite information to complete the growth of a full human being” (Chippinger, 2007).

Cyberspace is a dimension that exists beyond the wires, computers, and web pages that comprise the Internet. Cyberspace is the part of the Internet where the users interact and participate with each other, and a direct result of this participation with each other is the creation of a virtual world. The media forms of the past have all had limited capabilities to do just that, to effectively create a separate world (a virtual world) from that of the real-world. Cyberspace has the unique ability to communicate on a many-to-many scale, which in turn allows for the social dynamics and structure that are needed to form an effective social space. An example of the social dynamics in cyberspace can be seen on EBay. “A feedback system was created to accommodate members’ evaluations of one another. EBay solicited feedback from the participants after each transaction. Buyers and sellers rated one another as positive, negative, or neutral, and often appended a brief comment in their feedback. These ratings become a permanent part of each user’s membership file on the site.” (Chippinger, 2007). This rating system allows the user to achieve standing in the cyber community, and also provides a form of governance. The

new media-supported social sphere of cyberspace, which is inhabited by millions of users, has been summarized in the text of Don Slater into four properties: virtuality, spaciality, disembedding, and disembodiment. “Each of these emphasizes a radical disjuncture between online and offline relationships and identities” (Slater, 2002).

In order to explain the separation between the real-world and the virtual world, it is necessary to define the first property of the virtual world, virtuality. “The ideas of virtuality and simulation evoke the construction of a space of representation that can be related to ‘as if’ it were real, and therefore effects a separation from, or even replacement of, the ‘really real’” (Slater, 2002). Slater’s text states that, “The extreme point of virtuality... is the idea of ‘virtual reality’: a space of representations in which all one’s senses are exposed to coordinated representations such that the experience is completely immersive (though not mistaken for a ‘real’ one) and the participants can respond to stimuli as if to a real world that behaves consistently, in a rule-governed, non-arbitrary manner” (Slater, 2002). In other words, virtual reality is a user-created world that is influenced by the user’s familiarity with the real-world. The Internet may not be sensory immersed, because cyberspace is almost entirely textually based, but cyberspace is immersive in a social and intellectual manner. A classic example of this phenomenon would be cybersex. “Cybersex was a virtual reality because it allowed for absorbing interactive narratives based on the quasi-presence of the other and their participation in constructing a text” (Slater, 2002). As “virtual” applies to the Internet, in the social and intellectual immersion, cyberspace is developed into a “coherent social space” (Slater, 2002). By investigating the remaining three properties of cyberspace, the “coherent social space” of the virtual will become more apparent.

The second property, spaciality, as it applies to virtuality, is an ambiguous experience. “‘Cyberspace’ captures the sense of a social setting that exists purely within a space of representation and communication – software, the network – and therefore does not map clearly onto offline spaces” (Slater, 2002). The space, or spaciality, that provides cyberspace with a place to reside is comprised of the connections and networks that the users produce. “Networks are the extension of our social world; they also act as its boundary. We may use the network to extend the range of people we can contact; we may use it to limit the people who can contact us” (boyd & Donath, 2004). The uncontrollable nature of these horizontal connections, such as peer-to-peer networks¹¹, creates ambiguous boundaries for cyberspace. As a result, there is no connection that can be made to any particular physical, or real-world, identity. This especially is true in the case of peer-to-peer networks.

“The irrelevance of geographical position to Internet communication is often referred to as ‘disembedding’” (Slater, 2002). The next property of cyberspace, disembedding, demonstrates that physical location is not relevant when in the virtual world. An example of this property is demonstrated via the messaging program AIM (AOL Instant Messenger)¹². When the user participates in a chatroom¹³, or even in a peer-to-peer conversation, the user enters the virtual space that is established by the

¹¹ A peer-to-peer (or "P2P") computer network uses diverse connectivity between participants in a network and the cumulative bandwidth of network participants rather than conventional centralized resources where a relatively low number of servers provide the core value to a service or application. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peer-to-peer_network)

¹² AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) is an advertisement-supported proprietary instant messaging and presence computer program which allows registered users to communicate in real time. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AOL_Instant_Messenger)

¹³ A chatroom is a term used primarily by mass media to describe any technology ranging from real-time online chat over instant messaging and online forums to fully immersive graphical social environments. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatroom>)

immersion for a social or intellectual purpose (for example, to make contact with others or to find information), and once in that space it is irrelevant from what physical (real-world) location the user is logged in. Cyberspace is “inhabited by people who may be widely dispersed, but they share a context, rules and often a history of communication, and can properly treat their interactions as real, as having consequences (at least within the Internet context) and as valid” (Slater, 2002). Slater’s text then refers to the work of Marshall McLuhan (1974) and how McLuhan argued for the idea of a “global village.” The basis of this idea revolved around the radio and television, and McLuhan’s argument stated that as individuals from different areas of the globe gathered around their radios and televisions, “Everyone could be present at the same event at the same time,” (Slater, 2002) as if they were all in a village. This idea corresponds with the idea of using new media such as the Internet in order to disembed users from their physical locations and transport them to a central location, or “village,” for interaction.

The final property of cyberspace, disembodiment, “signifies that a person’s online identity is apparently separate from their physical presence, a condition associated with two features: textuality and anonymity” (Slater, 2002). Because the majority of cyberspace is text-based, the phrase ‘you are what you type’ clearly interprets how a digital identity is formed. The user is restricted in how they portray themselves by only the scope of their imagination, creativity and knowledge, which is made evident by their contributions. “A person’s online performance of identity had to be taken at face value, if only because there is no other information to go on” (Slater, 2002). Disembodiment also occurs due to its lack of attachment to other online activities, unlike in the real-world. In the real-world our actions are usually attached to things like our names,

addresses, previous relationships, medical and criminal records, memberships, etc.

“Online identities are anonymous with respect to one’s offline identity, to which it might be very difficult to trace one’s online performance” (Slater, 2002).

2. Putting on Cyberspace

“The body... sits at a computer terminal somewhere, but the locus of sociality that would in an older dispensation be associated with the body goes on in a space which is quite irrelevant to it [the body]” (Stone, 1995). To be in this space, there is no dependence on the body, however, there is a dependence on the computer terminal. All of science fiction fanatics should be rather familiar with what a cyborg represents. “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism” (Haraway, 1991). The idea of the cyborg is not isolated to the world of science fiction; the cyborg is present in social reality. “Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (Haraway, 1991). Today, the cyborg is real, and the separation between “science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (Haraway, 1991).

In the real-world the cyborg is not glorified as it often is in science fiction, but it is definitely present. The concept of the cyborg exists in those moments where humans depend on technology in order to exist. It is the mutual dependency that exists between humans and technology that creates the cyborg relationship between the two. Humans depend on technology in order to make their lives easier. For example, in developed countries, people consistently carry mobile phones, the reason being is that they serve as survival tools (Chipchase, 2007). “No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in

themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language” (Haraway, 1991). Technology is created with the intention and need to be used. In other words, technology depends on humans to operate it.

“Users of the Internet represent themselves within it solely through the medium of keystrokes and mouse-clicks, and through this medium they can describe themselves and their physical bodies any way they like; they perform their bodies as text” (Nakamura, 1999). This is a performance, or digital identity, that is completely dependent on the cyborg. Humans depend on the Internet to provide the social space, known as cyberspace, and they also depend on the computer as a tool to connect to the Internet, as well as a means to give the user a tool to generate and manage their digital identity. The technology exists with a dependence on humans to use and improve its capabilities. It is this hybrid relationship between humans (users) and technology (computers) that generates the digital, or cyborg, identity. “To enter cyberspace is to physically put on cyberspace. To become the cyborg, to put on the seductive and dangerous cybernetic space like a garment, is to put on the female. Thus cyberspace both disembodies, but also reembodies in the polychrome, hypersurfaced cyborg character... the such tactility associated with such a reconceived and refigured body constitutes the seductive quality of what one might call the cybernetic act” (Stone, 1991).

Conclusion

When approaching a conclusion regarding the differences between “real” and “fake” identities in cyberspace, we first examined the framework of a digital identity. Through this investigation it has been determined that the production of both “real” and “fake” digital identities depend on conscious decision making that is done while the user is constructing their digital identity. In cyberspace, the user has the freedom to present themselves in any manner that they deem fit. It is this freedom and the choices that they make that separate a digital identity from the user’s real-world identity. After the user has generated their digital identity, the public connections that are displayed as a part of these digital identities are what provide the identity with a sense of credibility. It is through these connections that the digital identity is given some form of establishment, much as the body provides a foundation for the real-world identity. In other words, one user generates what they see fit as their digital identity and it is the other users in cyberspace that provide legitimacy for the presented digital identity.

After dissecting how users form and establish a digital identity, we looked at why users are motivated to participate in cyberspace. Through this investigation, it was determined that the main purpose for a majority of user participation is for social interaction. There are a number of different tools that users can use to go about

accomplishing this social interaction in cyberspace, but no matter what form is being used the ultimate goal is simply to connect with other users. It is these desired connections that shape and foster the dynamics of cyberspace. By looking at examples of some of the more popular digital identities we see that commonalities drive users to particular areas of cyberspace. It is in these areas that users find others with similar interests with who they can interact.

The discussion then moved to how cyberspace is formed. It is the desire to connect with people that drives users to cyberspace, but it is the interaction that occurs in cyberspace that constantly builds and develops this space. Cyberspace is a world that is developed through the social and intellectual interaction of the users. This space is nurtured by the introduction of new users, which is accomplished by making the Internet more accessible, which gives more and more users the opportunity to cross the digital divide. As the users cross the digital divide and become active members in cyberspace they are doing so in a cyborg status. It is the integration between human and technology that creates this separate identity which exists in the technical realm of cyberspace. Humans depend on technology in order to conceive their digital identity into existence.

Cyberspace is a dynamic digital world that depends on the real-world to provide interaction and content, but as users log on they are “putting on” cyberspace. In the virtual world we are not bounded by the constraints that are placed upon ourselves by the real world. There are no true “real” or “fake” identities in cyberspace; rather, there are simply users that choose to use their real-world identity as inspiration for their digital identity, and there are other users that decide to create an identity that is wholly separate

from their real-world identity. Cyberspace is a separate world that forms separate identities.

Epilogue

The Rebirth of My Digital Identity

As stated at the beginning of this paper, my digital identity resides at www.aaronsmith.com. My original inspiration for creating a web page came from my curiosity with the Internet. The first version of my website was developed as a digital portfolio for all the creative work I had done to that point. As my technical knowledge of the web improved and as I was exposed to the interactive qualities of cyberspace, I started to adopt these applications to my website with the goal to make the webpage more dynamic.

As I started to create new versions of my website, my thought processes morphed. I would consider how the website was viewed by users (for example the graphic elements of the page), how a user could move throughout the website (for example the site navigation and layout), and how my website could be found in cyberspace. It was these questions that helped me transform my stagnant website into an interactive digital identity that has achieved a global audience. The biggest factor in my digital identities success was the incorporation of blogging technology. The addition of a blog allows me, and also motivates me, to continually provide new user-generated content. The continual addition of user-generated content helps my digital identity to achieve a greater presence

in cyberspace. As a result of continually adding user-generated content, I have noticed an increase in web traffic to my website.

It was the development of my website, in addition to my increased participation in social networking sites, which got me thinking about digital identity and how users represent themselves in cyberspace. The representation is a performance of self that the user dictates in any way they see fit. As a result, there is a creation of unique identities that reflect the user's ideas and the influence from cyberspace.

The digital identity that is currently represented is the fourth version. As my knowledge and ability of the web platform increased, my desire to redesign, or reconstruct, my digital identity intensifies. The performance of my digital identity changes and adapts to that of my real-world identity. The digital identity is deconstructed and then reconstructed to represent a digital identity that I choose to perform. As this paper comes to an end, consequently so does my current digital identity. I have started the steps towards the creation of the fifth version of my digital identity, and as long as I continue to participate in cyberspace this will be a continual cycle.

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