

## **Virtual Futures 2.0**

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This paper aims to explore the role that digital embodiment of the image has on influencing the integrity of the human body and the representation of the avatar as a cybernetic identity. To what extent does the integrity in the physical realm be challenged with online dialogue?

In Samuel Beckett's novel *Murphy* (1938), Murphy's state of mind is described in the following manner: "Nothing ever has been, was or would be in the universe outside it but was already present as virtual, or actual, or virtual rising into actual, or actual falling into virtual, in the universe inside it" (p. 63). This statement is the focus of *Telekinesis* (2011), a performance project produced by Franken Beaumont that demonstrates a contemporary need for rhetorical discourse between the virtual and the physical environments.

*Telekinesis* is a performance installation piece exploring the game of chess played by Murphy and Mr. Endon, in Beckett's novel, ultimately deciding the protagonist's fate. Mr. Endon is a schizophrenic patient, whose mental state, Murphy desires to have. The work questions this demise of Murphy in the moves made during the performance; instructions are projected on to the face of a mannequin. In front of the player, who is dressed in black, consists the black and white chess pieces while vertically projected onto the table are the chessboard and the positions the pieces are in. The player's aim is to follow the instructions given by the mannequin (the player makes all the moves) and the game concludes when Murphy surrenders after 88 moves. An alternative 'game' has been devised, as an interactive installation, demonstrating the cybernetic embodiment of the virtual in the real whereby the mannequin tells the story of *Murphy* as an avatar superimposed. Mr. Endon is encapsulated as a physicalised avatar dressed as a schizophrenic patient, all in white.

This is achieved with a webcam with a filter over the lens tracking the reflection of an Infra-red (IR) light source from a glove the player will wear. Isadora tracks the reflection to alter the instructions given. The data will also be programmed to implement a video fade of white noise projected on the face of the player and the chessboard onto the table. This allows the computer to subsequently track human action, as well as determine the move the player makes, in a manner that is expressed in the quote above.

An article published in The New York Times magazine on 5<sup>th</sup> January 2011, entitled 'Cyberspace When Your Dead!' reported on a marketing consultant, Adele McAlear, stating "it hadn't dawned on me, what happens to all of this stuff that you put out there," (Walker, R. 2011) referring to what is left behind, online, once a blogger has died. This has become more common as a large proportion of the population "have thoroughly integrated their Web expressions into their identity" (Walker, R. 2011). This article will demonstrate the questionable integrity of biological body when fully integrated towards a cyberspace existence.

The presence of avatars signifies the presence of humans' online. Where does the avatar stand in relation to the user? The avatars present in Multi-User Dimensions (MUD) and Multi-user Object-Orientation MUDs (MOO) are increasingly found as computer generated images (CGI) whereby the body appears to become totally reliant on the virtual. "Pleasure is no longer that of the scenic or aesthetic manifestation but that of pure fascination, aleatory and psychotropic" (Baurdillard, J. 1987, p.25). The allegorical nature of media reality, Baurdillard was suggesting in 1987, has engrained itself in the axiom of the digital image, moreover cybernetic activity has surpassed this aesthetic towards an absence of visual representation. One could argue, this both distances and embodies, in an ontological paradox the body and the virtual. MUDs and MOOs allow "users [to] create quasi-Stanislvskian

character biographies, logging on with a textual description of their physical and psychological attributes” (Dixon, S. 2007, p.470) that cannot help but be connected to the physical reality their bodies exist in.

The pretext of MUDs and MOOs was the direction *Prometheus* (2008) took, a telematic project exploring the physical body in the same context as the avatar. An image was superimposed upon the performer’s body then broadcast into Coventry University’s island in SecondLife, demonstrated the concept of a hyper real existence, by reducing the physical reality to consumable symbology. The body existed within a techno-transcended liminality where the image was of greater importance than the physical locality of the performer. Whereas *Prometheus* examined Baudrillard’s second order of simulacrum, that it “is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form” (Baudrillard, J. 1983, p.37), *Telekinesis*, on the other hand, is investigating the pornography of information that has become to determine reality through text-base language systems, with little aesthetic referent to the real, therefore, can be placed under Baudrillard’s third order of simulacrum.

Early online interactions were limited to text via Internet Relay Chats (IRC). Productions such as *Hamnet* (1993) and *An IRC Channel Named #Desire* (1995) exploited this. Users are known via profiles such as <HAMLET>, adopting a language system of abbreviations; ‘be right back’ has been shortened to ‘brb’. During *Hamnet*, Elsinore castle was created from “ASCII-only keyboard symbols,” (Dixon, S. 2007, p.487) allowing for a degree of pictorial representation. (6) Illustrations such as these have manifested itself in the psyche of the common user through symbolic faces, to display emotion in text messages and emails.

Personal reality has, thus engrained itself in this axiom to the extent that representation of ones self is fundamentally hypertextual. Twitter and Facebook is the driving force of the

current online fascination of hypertext, allowing users to update their status with only the use of hundred-and-forty characters. *Telekinesis* uses the IRC paradigm to express a feed of data producing a digital identity. The image of binary data directs the performer to complete moves, mathematically and this repeated until the game has culminated. The digital feed, provokes a response for action, whether a response to post comment or an instruction to make a move, as in *Telekinesis*. The performer or user has allowed him or her to be immersed in the digital, entering a symbolic existence.

It could then be argued to a larger extent the simulacrum of the physical reality is believed in the same respect as the virtual. Or maybe this should be the other way round; the virtual is believed in the respect of the physical? "A sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange" (Baudrillard, J. 1983, p.10). Dialogue of meaning between the real and the text is constant but what happens when this exchange is self-referent? One could argue continuing modifications of data are the functions of the transpatial existence and the body's significance in this is left in a state of an ontological paradox when in posting a blog. On 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2011 Franken Beaumont wrote the following:

"@FrankenBeaumont – Feeling like I'm in Raskolnikov's apartment (but slightly brighter) with similar prospects #crime&punishment #Dostoyevsky"  
(Bee, A. 2011, accesses from [www.twitter.com/#!/frankenbeaumont](http://www.twitter.com/#!/frankenbeaumont) on 27th May 2011)

If one understands this tweet in relation to Camus's (1942) understanding of existence, "a man defines himself by his make-believe as well as by his sincere impulses" (p.18), the role digital documentation plays is inherent towards creation of meaning. The blogger is stating,

'don't forget me, I am here too' through each tweet and from this creates action that is securing the blogger's physical and virtual presence.

To define oneself through status updates in a mode similar to IRC has prompted the user to be focused toward cyberspace. Instant access to information has, in the same manner as the chess game played in *Telekinesis*, enables the player to interact with an image, forcing a direct correlation between the virtual world and physical. In discussing Blast Theory's *Desert Rain* (2000) Matt Adams has stated this has "establish[ed] the illusion that the physical space is joined to an adjacent virtual space and that participants physically pass from one to the other" (Adams, M. et al. ud, p.22).

The social parameters that distinguish the actual from the virtual have diminished to the extent that the sincere aspect of action is created through rhetoric over bodily labour. What has been described so far in this paper can be summed up by Baudrillard (1987) when he states "there is no longer any symbolic referent to challenge of signs, and the challenge through signs, no more lost objects, no more recoverable object, no more original desire" (p.80). The online is no longer trying to mimic the actual through avatars but becoming interdependent.

Returning to the axiom of the hypertext and the digital, Lev Manovich (2001) has argued, data holds the same status in all digital forms, whether sound, imagery or film:

"Although... new media is indeed another type of media, from another it is simply a particular type of computer data, something stored in files and databases, retrieved and sorted, run through algorithms and written to the output device... New media may look like media, but this is only the surface" (Hansen, M. 2006 p. 32).

Digital data is a code and within this it is interpreted to be recognized as a particular format whether MIDI, sound, moving images, or text that differentiate the way files are to be read. Could it be perceived that the data creating a static image were represented as a sound file, hold the same integrity in the alternate format?

Baudrillard (2007) argued digital work with its self-referent nature has gone beyond the vanishing point of identity and therefore the limitlessness of its possibility has caused its own deconstruction of itself own hegemony. As digital aesthetics is revolved around information to be interpreted the images projected onto the mannequin in *Telekinesis* reflect this and the informative axiom that constitutes digital data becomes absurd as it stands outside the universe of significance, being autonomous and self-referent.

Images consequently can only be regarded in their relation to other images. "The impact of the work [is] squarely in the domain of the experience" (Hansen, 2006, p.3) for this reason, the body is reference for all interpretation regarding the semiotic nature of the image. Therefore, Franken Beaumont's micro-blog has stated his position, as being-in-this-world and being-apart-of-this-world in updating his tweet, just as much as he has announced his intentions in a virtual and the physical landscape.

As this paper has shown, digital data can only be interpreted in relation to the real as information passed between users to be interpreted, however the volume of usage has enabled us to question the integrity of the body's identity when the Internet, and virtual environments in general, have domineered the cultural landscape to the extent that accessibility to information is instant. It has explored some of the ideas present in *Telekinesis* and how the virtual has an integral effect on our behaviour. Have our identities and actions co-existing online have built a culture of rhetoric. Therefore to conclude can one question one's place in the digital when the digital is a meaningless totality of images and

information? When one dies, the image will be presented as the personal identity representing the digital afterlife or just 'digital litter'?

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