1.1 .COMMUNICATION

Text **Michael Heim**
Fotos **Guenther Parth**

Are we evolving into a trans-national Planetary We, an online community of hope?

KURZFASSUNG

Der Artikel in 20 Sekunden:

Networks dissolve the private Cartesian ego and promote the basic assumption that contact is possible, desirable, and ready to happen. The younger generation embraces **networks** readily, whether in the form of instant messaging or online role-playing, while the academic world is typically considering new media as "history" to be stored in museums. The younger generation understands that new media is not "history" but exists today as a call for participation. Online media are essentially interactive. So this leads us to the Digital We.

The poster for Steven Spielberg's film Minority Report warns: "You can't hide – Get ready to run." The warning applies to the Digital Me. Your data profile – the Digital Me – is captured on computer: credit card purchases, financial and tax statements, telephone bills, health records, online shopping, vehicle registration, and e-mail correspondence. Every keyboard and mouse stroke belongs to a data profile. The portrait of your Digital Me may hang someday in John Poindexter's office of Total Information Awareness.[1]

But while the Digital Me cannot escape the grid of modern life, it can run – or at least take some evasive steps. The first step is to acknowledge the Digital Me, and the next step is to create a stronger Digital We.

You notice your Digital Me when you click onto Amazon dotcom. As the Amazon page pours across the screen, you see "Hello Michael Heim! <your name here>". Then "Here are some books and movies you will enjoy <list follows with book covers, reviews, prices, and links>". The page shows a portfolio of your interests based on previous activity, indicating your preferences in reading, music, and video. You can even click to learn "Why Amazon suggests these items for you, Michael Heim <your name here>". The cascading data holds up a mirror that reveals the Digital Me – how the computer network perceives you.

Refresh the page or return later and the digital portrait varies its angle of view. This is the HAL 9000 computer (from the Kubrick/Heinlein movie "2001: A Space Odyssey") where you are watched through the portal of an apparently secure space pod as you sit and talk unaware that your lips are being read by a machine that is assessing how to guide your behavior according to the machine's program. The Digital Me is the "I" objectified by data and assembled into a profile. The profile projects a probable future based on past activities. And this data mirror makes endless narcissism possible – along with the sobering realization that computer privacy is illusory. While you feel you are in control, the interface is in fact a two-way window where you are observed while you are observing.

The Digital I can run from the Digital Me through deception. The inner self, seeking control over the objectified construct, can design a Digital Me that misleads. Like a decoy, the false Me is tracked while the real "I" hides behind the screen, willfully supplying fake names, feigned interests, and fabricated references. The real I can also invent multiple

instances of the Digital Me, like a Saddam Hussein with multiple body doubles, illusions to protect the inner palace of the self. Yet the Digital I never escapes the picture entirely. Even random login names and passwords bear a personal touch that, over time, lead back to a validating signature, home address, or telephone number. Furthermore, deception is counter-productive because secrecy runs counter to the grain of networks. Networks connect people for shared activities.

The network did not always belong to computing. Before the Internet emerged in the early 1990s, computers were generally not perceived as socializing tools but as calculating devices. Even during the 1950s, the computer appeared in newspaper cartoons as a room-size box for cranking out impersonal intelligence, threatening to make the human brain obsolete.

The proto-computer of Cartesian philosophy was a calculator (French ordinateur) for the solitary ego defined as res cogitans, each monad frozen in front of an isolated information box. Freed from Descartes' solipsism and Leibniz's monadic rationalism, the computer gradually became personal and then social.

Today, micro-sized devices support a wide range of functions including social exchange in a networked society. The role-playing video games, so popular and currently overtaking the film industry in annual revenues are about socializing with other players. This is where "the street" takes over the rationalist information device and asserts the needs of communities.

If the Digital Me is hidden behind false constructs, the concealment is self-defeating in the context of networks. Networks exist for contact, collaboration, exchanges. The strict Cartesian skepticism that seeks absolute certainty must remain in a solipsistic limbo where no one can ever prove absolutely once and for all that trustworthy minds do indeed exist on the other end of the wire.

Networks dissolve the private Cartesian ego and the basic assumption that contact is possible, desirable, and ready to happen. The younger generation embraces networks readily, whether in the form of instant messaging or online role-playing, while the academic world is typically "defining" new media to fit the departmentalized legacy of universities and considering new media as "history" to be stored in museums (a tendency attacked over a century ago by Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*). The younger generation understands that new media is not "history" but exists today as a call for participation. Online media are essentially interactive. As such, they dynamically resist definition through categories. The Artistotelian yearning for definitions must give way to participation and intervention.

Through participatory engagement, the Digital We outruns the Digital Me. The dynamic community of the Digital We continually outpaces the snapshots collected by the network. Real-time presence lives, as Kierkegaard says, forward into the future whereas snapshots revert to what is already past.

The Digital We of real-time agency re-constitutes the community through freedom and spontaneity. The Digital We belongs to what Geert Lovink calls "tactical media."[2] Media participation can belong to tactics that prevent the usurpation of community by corporate and government interests. The Digital We adds free, spontaneous play by designing avatars that "cross down" (Sanskrit *ava-tar*) into the virtual world, consciously revising their shapes. The avatar has a flexible, fluid identity that reveals chosen aspects of the real I. Avatars can range from the simple e-mail nickname with graphic icons to the animated "body" that moves about in virtual worlds, as in ActiveWorlds software or Adobe Atmosphere.[3]

The most radical medium for social participation is the graphic representation of the human body because anthropomorphic forms intrinsically attract others and can facilitate mutual recognition (Kant's *gegenseitige Anerkennung*). Body-based avatars appear in many of the currently successful Internet games, from the U.S. Army's free recruitment game America's Army (www.americasarmy.com) where first-person shooters are socialized to become members of a strategic team, to the more civil communities of Sims and EverQuest. Not to be overlooked are the lesser known quiet worlds of the Zen garden and the Educational Universe (see *.copy 04*).

The avatar can project a playful or fantastical Digital Me that defies profiling. As a socially engaged being, the avatar is a paradigm for networked activity that affirms a Digital We. The tactic of "role-playing" derives from the medieval legacy of masquerades – where concealment artfully reveals what convention deems unseemly. The masquerade makes possible encounters where the Real-Me meets another Real-Me through cloaked imaginary identities.

Where does the Digital We run? Where is it going? What goal beckons the online community? Are we evolving into a trans-national Planetary We, an online community of hope? The hope is not only to outrun the Digital Me but also to wed the virtual with the physical in such a way as to pacify the planet. Consider one speculative proposal that appeared in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Fußnoten:

1) *www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/poindexter.html* During the Reagan administration, John Poindexter (retired Vice Admiral in the US Navy) was the national security adviser who devised the secret Iran-Contra networks that the White House used to illegally sell arms to the fundamentalist dictators of Iran and then schemed to divert the ill-gotten gain to the Nicaraguan rebels who sought to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. Poindexter's violations of the public trust were so extreme that in the late 1980s his story came to serve as an internationally recognized example of what happens when government officials begin to operate outside the legal and moral boundaries of civil society. Poindexter now heads the Office of Total Information Awareness at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA – see *.copy* 11).

2) Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture,* The MIT Press, September 2002

3) For ActiveWorlds software, see *www.activeworlds.com;* for Adobe Atmosphere, see *www.adobe.com/atmosphere*

4) The proposal originated in a May 2002 interview with the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* and then developed in the Design Matters Task Force at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. See the proposal at *www.mheim.com/iai*. To date, the proposal is still seeking institutional support.

The proposal is called “International Avatars Initiative” (IAI) or simply “Avatar Diplomacy.”[4]

The proposal advocates communication among the youth in world conflict zones by creating playful role-playing games hosted in local educational institutions. In order to integrate face-to-face meetings with online, intercultural exchanges, the plan begins with existing physical nodes, such as schools, hospitals, or computer-ready institutions like the Intel-sponsored PC Clubhouses. Each node mirrors, through online meetings, its sister-nodes at other international locations. At the physical nodes, children meet face-to-face with college-age mentors weekly to learn about designing avatars and to participate in the international avatar meetings.

The avatars can be built by means of using 3D toolkits like Avatar Lab, a software subset of Poser software (www.curiouslabs.com). Children familiar with dolls or Mr. Potato Head can assemble 3D shapes of humanoids or animals, which can serve as online proxy identities. Ideally, the avatar identities express cultural identity at each local node. College mentors facilitate the children’s play in the avatar games so that mutual respect can cross over the lines of conflict zones. From such encounters might there not emerge an intercultural style of avatar?

The Digital We may someday speak a non-verbal “inter-language” that is neither stubbornly local nor vapidly Esperanto. Such inter-language might bring about the enhanced human who moves freely among cultures while respecting the best of many localities. The avatar then becomes a graphic embodiment of the world citizen, the Digital Me that attains freedom through deeper engagement. ■

The most radical medium for social participation is the graphic representation of the human body

DER AUTOR

Michael Heim, einer der wichtigsten Medienphilosophen der Internetepoche, lehrt am Art Center College of Design in Pasadena und ist Mitarbeiter bei *.copy.*