

Simulations in Cyberspace: Shadows on the walls

Summary

This article examines the relationship between reality and illusion in global cyberspace, and presents possibilities of crossing the border between reality and hyperreality in cyberspace. Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulation constitute the theoretical framework, and these theories are tested to see whether they are suitable for analysing cyberspace. Baudrillard's views are regarded in this article as somewhat prognostic – quite a few of his viewpoints have found outlets in later technological developments. The current article should be taken as an introduction to a topic that makes possible a more profound and thorough treatment, as here only the initial possible variants of approach are delineated.

The questions to which the article seeks an answer are: has computer technology contributed anything to the eternal question of the relationship between truth and imagination? Does technology make it possible to materialise illusions and dreams? What would be the peculiarity of illusions created by means of such technology?

As the article focuses on Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, a general survey is given of his views. The emphasis is on one of Baudrillard's main works, 'Simulacres et simulation' (1981). Here, Baudrillard defines the contemporary postmodern era as an era of simulation, characterised by hyperreality. The hyper-real world is dominated by simulacra – copies of real things or events that do not have an original. Baudrillard's theories concentrate on problems that tackle reality, imagination and illusion, and he regards hyperreality and simulacra as the key phenomena of postmodern society.

Cyberspace, one result of the high technological development of postmodern society, could essentially be regarded as a postmodern phenomenon. Cyberspace is extreme fragmentation, a network that unites information and people. The Internet can be seen as the embodiment of the postmodern world, lacking one big centre, one single truth, the 'great narrative' – instead there are a number of individual elements.

As cyberspace was created by means of a specific technology, we could generalise and say that cyberspace produces a technological illusion. There are various ways to do this and these ways are directly dependent on the development of computer technology.

This article examines four different possibilities.

1. Some of the first technological possibilities that enabled the computer to simulate reality or create hyperreality were text-based online role plays with many users – MUDs (*multi user dungeons*). Hyperreality was created by the texts and words written by the players. At the same time it became another reality for the participants in the game, and the role, too, could acquire the shape of a new reality, merge with true reality or in some cases replace it.

2. The other technological possibility is the Internet, which, in addition to all other functions, is also a means of communication. Communication on the Internet takes place in cyber communities, mostly in text-based forums and chat rooms. However, it is also possible to create a reality different from true reality in the latter two: the participants can change their identities, and forums may produce their own micro-societies, cyber communities that usually gather around some object or area of interest. We can therefore say that the world of forums, chat rooms and blogs contains possibilities of hyperreality;

the users present personnas which could easily be simulations, and the described reality may not be real.

3. The third technological possibility of simulating reality is virtual reality. The technology of virtual reality also exists in reality and requires elaborate technical equipment: data helmets and gloves. But as virtual reality spreads only in limited areas (the war industry etc.), it remains a science-fiction phenomenon for the common user. At the same time, we could say that virtual reality could be regarded as hyperreality *par excellence*. There is no border between reality and imagination: cyberspace seems just as real or even more so than the actual surrounding world.

4. In addition to virtual reality, developing computer technology has produced a fourth possibility. Unlike the limited usage of virtual reality, it has spread via the Internet throughout the entire cyberspace, especially in recent years, because the user only needs an ordinary computer with Internet access. These are the 'synthetic worlds' (or 'virtual worlds'). According to Edward Castronova, the features of virtual worlds are interactivity (the computer programme is simultaneously used by a large number of people who can communicate with one another), physicality (the programme is used via 'avatars', which simulate real human characters), and persistence (the programme continues to run even when nobody is using it, and the activity and locations of people and objects are preserved). This article briefly introduces the peculiarity of synthetic worlds, focusing on the virtual world 'Second Life'.

'Second Life' can be regarded as a combination and development of previous technologies – text-based role plays, the Internet, virtual reality and graphic interface, where the user is represented in the shape of an avata-

tar. Unlike earlier fantasy games, the world of 'Second Life' is relatively normal. People just live there, come together, communicate, sit in cafès, and create and construct various objects to be bought and sold. This world is thus quite similar to actual reality, 'the first life'; even the main rules are the same. The user can, nevertheless, create a new identity for himself within the existing possibilities and fulfil dreams that he failed to achieve in the real world. The dimension resembling reality and the lack of fantasy elements grant synthetic worlds the status of a special replacement world. In a synthetic world, man can lead, not the life of a fairy tale, but a seemingly totally real life, which possesses nearly all the elements of real life, but nevertheless remains for the user a 'second life', an illusion, hyperreality.

The confirmation and applicability of Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality can be here observed in a more vivid form. The entire 'Second Life' is one big simulation, Disneyland developed to the extreme – the key example of Baudrillard's hyperreality. The avatars moving around in a synthetic world are simulacra, copies, which have never had an original. They are connected to actual reality only via the consciousness of the users. Illusion and simulacra in 'Second Life' thus become superior to real life, and the existing values of the real world are replaced by illusion, which can only be used in hyperreality, in an illusory world.

We can, therefore, observe that life functioning in cyberspace, cyber communities and various virtual worlds of cyberspace all form a new and different reality. Instead of reality, synthetic worlds offer illusion, surrogate life. The cyberspace simulacra can in fact be more truthful than the objects of reality; ideas and emotions reigning in hyperreality overshadow the actual, primary reality.

The question of whether computer technology has added something to the eternal issue of the relationship between truth and imagination can be answered as follows.

Simulacra created in cyberspace are technological. The surrogate society operating in cyberspace is a technological society, which has developed through text-based online games, forums and chat rooms into refined, elaborate and detailed cyber commune shadow societies, such as 'Second Life'.

Another aspect of technological surrogate societies is collectivism: the dreams of many people are being realised in the same space simultaneously. The concurrent activity of many people naturally has a reciprocal effect, and the development of a virtual society, and thus the transformation of imagination, no longer depend on an individual, but on the behaviour of the entire group of people.

We could thus claim that computer technology has helped people to materialise their fantasies and give them shape. Computer technology also makes it possible to share your fantasies and watch those of others.

We could, therefore, conclude that Baudrillard's simulation theory is indeed suitable for analysing the virtual worlds in cyberspace. It can be claimed that cyberspace, emerging as a result of developing computer technology, is a hyperreal environment in Baudrillard's sense. Cyber communities, operating in cyberspace, live their simulation-filled imaginary lives and the objects they encounter, create, use and exchange are simulacra.

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