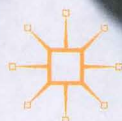# THE

IMMERSIVE
INTERNET

Reflections on the
Entangling of the Virtual
with Society, Politics,
and the Economy

Edited by
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The Immersive Internet

Reflections on the Entangling of the Virtual with Society, Politics, and the Economy

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and probably knew more about my prospects than I did. What was the game here? It seemed strangely familiar. So I replied, 'That's what they tell me, but you are smarter than that. You and I can reach an understanding that will work for us both.' Again the deadpan hippo replied with a cryptic, 'Why do you say that?' and suddenly I knew I was played. They had hooked up a freakin' Ask Eliza chatterbot for the meet! They hadn't even gone with one of the smarter Turing AIs! They wanted to deliberately insult me and I knew that my ass was fried. The Mumbai market opened in an hour and Y.U.K.O. was going to exercise its option to acquire the DomDrachma (D♃). My creditors would be happy to get out with anything so they'd dump and run as soon as the offer was made. I was merkeled well and good.

It has been about three months since that night, and things played out about as I expected as I moved from currency to sapped. I was surprised at first that the Y.U.K.O. actually kept the DomDrachma (D♃) running rather than shutting it down completely. But apparently the Chongqing incident had created a niche in the occidental fetish markets of the intertubes, and as a result there remained a bit of a cachet (granted, an exceedingly sordid one) to the DomDrachma (D♃). Still, it allowed me to maintain a little pride, which is destroyed every day (twice on Saturdays and Sundays) when I have to do my employer-mandated feelie broadcasts. Man, there are some sick, sick ideas about concrete out on the intertubes. Still as the advertising campaign says, 'Better sapped than citizen,' and I accepted my fate with a happy heart (as mandated by Section 13, paragraphs 2–7 of my contract).

An Afterword in Three Postcards

Tom Boellstorff

How do you reply to a postcard?

This book is comprised of postcards from the metaverse – reflective essays about online socialities. I agreed to write an afterword before reading any of these postcards: with all their fascinating insights they now lie scattered before me. What to do? I shall see where the path of analogy may lead.

Let us, then, truly regard these chapters as postcards from the metaverse. The metaphor suggests objects, practices, and subjectivities: it presumes temporalities and geographies. Let us thus treat these chapters not just as images but as two-sided artifacts with stamps, postmarks, and signatures that trace histories of social relation. Rarely does one send a postcard from home. Fragmented commentaries on travel, postcards imply that the sender is Elsewhere, in a strange and distant land, usually cosmopolitan (say, Paris) or exotic (say, a tropical island). Postcards from places like my home state of Nebraska in the American Midwest play off these tropes with their tongue-in-cheek images of skiers in cornfields, or giant jackrabbits. Brief records of fleeting encounters with the Other, postcards demand concision: one can only write a couple of sentences on their reverse sides. This shapes the striking fact that postcards do not demand a reply: it is typically assumed that the sender will have moved on (or returned home) by the time the receiver has the postcard in hand. They do not create a circuit of correspondence. Indeed, postcards usually do not even include a place for a return address.

So how do you reply to a postcard? It seems the most appropriate response is to violate the norms of one-way communication and exotic visitation the postcard genre implies, and send back three postcards of my own. Consider these not as postcards from the metaverse,

or postcards from the 'real world' so often assumed to lie opposed to the metaverse, but postcards of the gap: postcards of the interchange between the online and offline, of the double move between virtual and actual that is not convergence, but the true reality of human existence.

First postcard

My first postcard shows two avatars sitting in a virtual Parisian park, enjoying the beauty of lush fields of blooms in a warm evening's glow. On the reverse I might write, 'went to the metaverse but didn't see anything unusual.'

There is a desperate need to banalize the metaverse, to question the idea that it lies at an exotic remove. It is this initial and deeply flawed gesture of estrangement that makes thinkable the equally flawed subsequent claim that the online and offline are 'blurring'. We must move beyond the hype of total social transformation but also the anti-hype of inevitable addiction and domination. We must move beyond, as well, obsessions with predicting the future: their utility is limited for the simple reason that we cannot study that which has not happened. We might consider speaking of unexpected developments and multiple paths of possibility. Those who present psyche or society in terms of discrete linear stages mask the diversity and contingency of reality, in the metaverse and the physical world.

The Immersive Internet can, of course, have good or bad consequences, and thinking about what comes next is useful for everyone from designers to science fiction authors. However, what is currently underemphasized is better understanding the less sexy (but no less valuable) everyday practices of online interaction. These everyday practices rarely appear on postcards but are noteworthy nonetheless. Photographs of a wedding say little about everyday married life: the important stuff is what happens between the big events. This everyday sociality is hard to grasp precisely because it is so taken for granted. It is contextual and emergent.

Second postcard

My second postcard shows an avatar on a tiny desert island, feet tucked into warm sand while considering how to obtain a coconut from the fronds of a tree above. Flip the postcard over and the short message might read, 'Could have used some help. Missing you.'

When it comes to the internet, what does it mean to be immersed? The question is best answered by examining the empirical realities of life online. With the rise of broadband internet connections and more powerful personal computers, we have seen the rise of more photorealistic online environments; these raise new possibilities for immersive experience. However, early visions of a future where we lie in warm baths of gelatin to be plugged into a system that hijacks our sensorium have not come to pass. While for a few specialized domains (flight simulators for novice pilots, for instance) systems approaching immersion in this totalizing sense may be of interest, overall the so-called 3D internet is only three-dimensional from the avatar's perspective. Most people neither want nor need sensory immersion: brilliant graphics and to a lesser extent sound suffice, limited to screen and speaker.

I intend my forlorn postcard to recall how, throughout the internet age, social immersion has been the true form of immersion. The 'stickiness' of a social networking site like Facebook has little to do with sensory excess and everything to do with social interaction, and this can include interaction with people we have never met (and will never meet) in the physical world. Even visually rich and three-dimensional online environments are rarely seen as immersive if there is no one else in them – one reason for the addition of sharing, chatting, and other social functions in more and more online environments, as well as the use of non-player characters (NPC) and other computer-controlled social interlocutors.

Third postcard

My final postcard is an avatar portrait: a head held in hand, gazing with clear eyes into an unseen distance. The reverse might read, 'I'll always be here for you.' Embodiment has always been a hallmark of the Immersive Internet, evoking strong reactions with regard to the key issue of the real. But this embodiment is always emplacement as well; if anything, what makes some aspects of online sociality seem 'immersive' is that it makes place, permitting things like synchronic social interaction and persistent content. And these selfhoods and socialities, these speech acts and commercial exchanges, these weapons and gardens, all are in their way real. The boundary between the virtual and the physical is not isomorphic with the boundary between the real and the unreal. Not only does the boundary lie in a different place: it is a different kind of boundary altogether.

Thus it is that the greatest conceptual error that continues to plague understandings of virtual worlds and the Immersive Internet more broadly is the idea that the virtual and the real are blurring or converging. This belief is mistaken on two counts. First, it is incorrect to oppose the virtual and the real. Such a dichotomy forces us into an analytic framework in which we decide ahead of time that the online is not real. Yet we make friends online we never meet in the physical world, or meet only after the reality of the friendship is well established. We spend real money online, some of it on virtual goods like a new shirt for that avatar gracing the front of our postcard. We take a math or history course online, and what we learn (and how we thus grow as individuals) is quite real. On the other hand, we play in the physical world, pretend to be something, lose all our money in a game of Monopoly.

The gap between the virtual and the actual is not the doing of a scholar, artist, or technology entrepreneur. It is a form of relation, like the relation between a postcard and the word 'postcard', or between the two sides of a postcard. In fact, what if we took the two sides of a postcard as one way to understand immersion – thinking of immersion not in terms of being 'inside' something but in terms of the surfaces that collectively delineate an object? Or, if we look to language for insight, the word is in no danger of becoming the thing, for it is the gap between them that makes language possible.

Alongside drawing from such possible alternative conceptual traditions, we badly need more careful empirical research exploring the constant movements between the virtual and actual that make the internet possible as a space of sociality. In this regard, one important arena for investigation is how it is not just that we enter the Immersive Internet to meet preexisting needs and desires (for friendship, fantasy, labor, etc.); new needs and desires can emerge through our engagements with the Immersive Internet itself.

Into the mail slot: mobile futures

So off I go to the post office with my three postcards to send back to you, dear reader. In turning the usual one-way communication of the postcard genre into a correspondence, I hope to build a research community, a shared conversation of inquiry. When it comes to the Immersive Internet, we can all say almost anything. We can point to legitimate examples of deception and malice. We can point as well to legitimate examples of creativity and kindness. In this, as in so many other ways, the online and the offline are not so different.

Indeed, a second reason I send these replies is, as noted earlier, to banalize or de-exoticize the Immersive Internet. The gap between virtual and actual is not a gap that divides. It is not a moat but a bridge – far less like the conceptual chasm between Self and Other or Same and Different, and far more like the productive zone of transaction between symbol and referent. It is a zone of connection, but not of blurring or convergence. It is the maintenance of the distinction – even with all the moving back and forth across it – that makes the virtual and actual possible, just as no laptop or gaming console could function without the gap between the zeroes and ones of digital computation.

This need to de-exoticize the Immersive Internet is of particular urgency because of our dire need for a theoretical language to address the co-occurrence of immersion and mobility. The rise of cloud computing and mobile devices like smartphones and tablets means that the Immersive Internet will increasingly be mobile in the physical world, and in real time. We now carry the Immersive Internet with us, and in specific places: in Germany or China, in a New York subway, or on a combine in rural Nebraska. In many cases this mobility of the Immersive Internet will thus vary according to physical world context: playing an online game while sitting on a bus versus in a darkened room at home, or holding up our smartphone to see information about local stores overlaid on our view of the street. In other cases, there may be surprising ways in which the Immersive Internet will not vary by physical world context, and could even provide threads of narrative and experiential continuity through those contexts and between dispersed localities.

We cannot know in advance what these futures will entail; even understanding the shifting present is a great challenge. But it is an exciting challenge that suggests new theories, new methods, and new research communities, even while suggesting renewed attention to classic theories, methods, and disciplines as well. It is precisely when everything seems to be so novel that it is crucial to engage deeply with histories of research practice and conceptual innovation; far too often what appears unprecedented is in fact powerfully predicated on what came before.

From their origins, forms of online sociality seen as 'immersive' have engendered concern. They can be regarded as places where people can lose themselves, become addicted, severed from reality. They can with equal validity be regarded as places where crafting, hacking, and making lead to forms of social engagement with real consequences for the physical world. So enough of postcards for now. They have done their valuable work of showing a range of realities and possibilities, online

and offline. They have recalled important elements of the past, shown fascinating aspects of the present, and speculated on a range of possible futures. Now is the time for longer missives, products of sustained research and collaborative theoretical work. We need novels from the metaverse, diaries, even scholarly articles. Through such work we can strive for a more robust and multifaceted understanding of the promises and perils of the Immersive Internet, and seek to ensure that these worlds we make serve goals of social justice and true human flourishing, a flourishing which has always been virtual as well as physical.

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