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## **Second Life and Hyperreality**

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This is a brief essay, we call "think-pieces", designed to stimulate a discussion on a particular topic. For this series of essays we propose the following question:

"Consumer behavior in virtual worlds, is it really any different to the real world, or is it simply a case of 'old wine in a new bottle'?"

**Keywords:** virtual worlds; post-modernity; hyperreality; Second Life; mythology.

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## Second Life and Hyperreality

By Michel Maffesoli, Centre d'Études sur l'Actuel et le Quotidien, Université René Descartes – Sorbonne Paris V

We are used to this big claim carried by modern positivism: “Truth will not escape us”. This has been the engine of a self-confident history, at least from an idealistic point of view. It had a goal, an ending, and a meaning. Cause and effect of the whole lie in one truth. This is the foundation of all major theoretical systems of modernity.

Myths do not care about such truth. At most, they carry some little tiny truths. Mythology is the art of episodes, nice stories that one tells himself, which allow tribes to find their own structure.

Historians of religions and mythologies remind us that meanings of a myth are always plural, not unique. A myth is made of a multiplicity of “lessons”, all being various versions, each telling differently this or that aspect of the legend, of the tale. When reunited together like a mosaic, they create the meaning.

This is exactly what Second Life is. A multiple life is possible. Each element of this multiplicity carries its own truth, refracting the plurality amongst individuals, but reuniting into one person.

This may seem paradoxical, and it certainly is, when contrasted with the ideology of transparency that has progressively imposed itself since individuality was invented. The individual, which is, by definition, “indivisible”, becomes it only when, after going through educational processes, he is certain of his sexual identity, then his ideological identity, then his professional identity.

In such transparency, highly rational, comparable to what Paul Valéry called “the brutality of concept<sup>1</sup>”, the individual is conceptualized, which etymologically means “locked up in a definition” (*concepire*). As the image of God, he is unique and must think and act consequently.

Is Second Life compensation? Is it the beginning of another mythology? For sure, through its various avatars, each person is hidden, under the secret, and throw its less avowable desires in the welcoming shapes of all his avatars.

“Avatar”, in itself, is a very significant term. It is not, as commonly interpreted, a bad event, an accident which interrupts the harmonious stream of life. Avatar, in the Hindu mythology, means a reincarnation of a Divinity. Through their metamorphosis, they constantly distort the image we have of them, they shake the concept, and the definition we think we know about those Gods. A continuous metamorphosis clearly described in the *Mahâbhârata*.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Valéry, *Oeuvres complètes*, Pléiade, 1974, vol.1, p.795



**Fig. 1 – An avatar in Second life, and a statue from the Hampi temple in India<sup>2</sup>.**

The same phenomenon is perceivable in Second Life. What we find in all virtual worlds, is the abandon of the “official” identity to the benefit of an illusion, some rubbing, and detours; allowing the individual to protect himself while expressing all potentialities, all different possibilities which creates him.

The “I is another<sup>3</sup>” by Rimbaud is no longer a simple poetical exaggeration, but an “hyper reality” gearing itself in myriad of different specimens. Each mask is the expression of a metaphor; proceeds by suggestion, and therefore faces, while being protected, the vertigo of human existence.

In the labyrinth of life, one is always many. In the maze of Second Life, one continuously bursts out of pleasure. Beyond the principle of reality of our professional life, of our family routine, we live, or we dream, sometimes both at the same time, the fairy tales, or the nightmares

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<sup>2</sup> The first photograph was found on Google. The second photograph is a personal photograph of Serge Soudoplatoff.

<sup>3</sup> Rimbaud, letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May, 1871.

which allow us to escape from the exhausting habits which, little by little, destroys our vital energy. On the contrary, our avatars allow us to live phantasms and imaginations, which have a reinvigorating function.

Romain Rolland defined with a great subtlety the essence of bourgeois' literature: "you do not read books, you read yourself through books"<sup>4</sup>. This is a perfect definition of the Gutenberg galaxy. Reading is a perpetual dialog between one individual and his dreamed mirror.

According to one's taste, one can be Rastignac or Madame Bovary, d'Artagnan or Gavroche, Julien Sorel or la Princesse de Clèves. All those characters are archetypes allowing us to express all our parallel lives, crystallizing a collective memory, building each of into of a community of destiny, therefore of a culture.

This is what "digital culture" is about. A "galaxy of imagination". One does not read avatars, one reads himself through avatars. The friend of books became the friend of virtual worlds. The reality principle is abandoned to the profit of a phantasm that becomes reality. But this is a metamorphosis as I have described earlier: superfluous puts aside what is essential; phantasm becomes stronger than spirit of seriousness.

But all this creates a culture. Just as fans of Proust or Balzac existed, secret societies exist inside Second Life. Little tribes, networked together, create the foundation for the growth of the postmodern "being together".

Let us remember the first meaning of mythology: a shared secret, which is a link between his owners.

Each individual, through his successive avatars (and the possibilities are infinite) will create links. It does not matter whether this link becomes real or not, "hyper reality" is part of virtuality. Beyond addiction, experiencing "a second life" can be a completion.

This reminds us a simple thing: a certain period of our life, the importance is not to exist by or for oneself, but to exist through the lens of the others. The other decides who I am.

This is the myth of the postmodern narcissism, close to the myth of pre-modernity: a "group narcissism."

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<sup>4</sup> L'éclair de Spinoza.