

Sex, Lies and Reality

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Much has been talked about 'Web 2.0', but what is it, really, and what does it mean both for the people who use it and those of us who are responsible for brand marketing? In simple terms we're going to include in the definition all forms of social networking, but with particular emphasis on virtual worlds such as Second Life that offer a more immersive experience.

Why is this important, why should we understand it? We think it's because these represent the latest way technology is reshaping our view of the world, our culture and our behaviour. From a marketing perspective we're seeing a massive democratisation of media; it's not owned by us any more, it's owned by people, it's driven by peer to peer conversations. The new buzzwords are community, collaboration and co-operation.

What we needed to understand, beneath the media gossip, was how deep does this all go? Are we simply hearing about the exploits of a few radicals who the majority of us may never follow?

Is the so-called 'death of advertising' a genuine possibility? We've seen a lot about how brands are trying to react to these developments and engage with people in these new spaces. But what we haven't seen or read is any real understanding of the ordinary people who use these spaces. Why do they do it? What's in it for them? That was the starting point for our research.

But where to begin? For starters we need to look beneath the surface, otherwise our thoughts will be diverted by the strange shapes that people adopt, the way 'reality' as we know it seems to be distorted. But if you think of a story such as the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe it reminds us that there's nothing new in this world, people have always been fascinated by what lies beyond. Drinking, drugs, daydreaming, fantasising, trance, are all ways to distort reality. The question is whether crossing the threshold of the virtual changes us more fundamentally, even after we have returned to the physical world.

Our study was a big piece of work; we looked across 19 markets and spoke with about 4,000 people. We worked with Dr Alex Gordon, the semiotician to understand the signifiers and codes, especially around avatar design. We used ethnography within the virtual worlds. And we also did some conversation analysis, to dissect and deconstruct the language people use when they're talking to each other online.

So let's look at avatars first, the visual identities that on-line users create to represent themselves. Alex concludes that most avatars are rooted in myth, legend and fable, including modern icons such as punk or cyber punk; and we also find those avatars conforming to very conventional gender stereotypes. But, what about the wings? The truth is really quite mundane. For most, because they can fly in Second Life they think they should have some wings. Of course we can look at the psychological associations with angels and freedom, but the reasons are still quite familiar.

Possibly the most interesting thing we found was the way women avatars appear and behave. In brief, most correspond to the one dimensional images that men have of women. We are seeing women through male eyes. What's particularly fascinating about this is it's been suggested that 80% of female avatars are actually men and I've seen another statistic that 75% of male avatars are actually women. If this is true, not only does it help explain the stereotyping, it also builds nicely on the idea that many people use these places to experiment with their identity. We know this is true because 43% of our sample agreed with statement, "I'm a complex person by nature. Visiting virtual worlds helps me understand more about myself."

Now we did find examples of women avatars who are not as obviously stereotyped. Ones who used glasses or different hairstyles in ways that suggested they were restraining, controlling their sexual modesty; codes signifying female intelligence and individualism; so could these be women? And we get a lot of female warriors as well, but is this post-feminist empowerment or just more masculine fantasy? If I had to guess I'd say (mostly) early stages of the former.

Now let's turn to some of the popular myths that have grown up around Web 2.0 already. One, that it's just freaks and geeks; two, that people actually think and behave differently; three, that it's an anarchic and lawless place, and it really is the wild west out there; four, it is basically about porn; five, that it really does mess you up and is making us a society of peril.

We think it's a mistake to see these people as freaks and geeks. One of the people we met was Pascal, she lives in Belgium. She's 39, an ex-air hostess, single, no children and an avid Second Life visitor. She's built her own house there, it's a tree house next to the sea, and she hasn't lost touch of what reality and virtual space is all about, she just enjoys it because it replaces her international airline experience. She talks to people in different languages in different countries.

Then there's Mohammed in Dubai, he's a Muslim, and he does a lot of blogging. He gets involved in debates online, but he told us that he never goes in as Mohammed the Muslim, he'll go in as a white Christian fundamentalist, he'll go in as anything he wants to be to promote a debate, his conviction being that if I go in as Mohammed the Muslim from Dubai, no one will talk to me, the debate won't be real. So while it's deceptive, it's also very useful, because those visual cues are now missing, and internet psychology tells us that people are far more honest, far more willing to divulge honest and true thoughts to people they've never met, or are not likely to meet.

The owner of Millions of Us said it's a mistake to see these people as among the sleazy, there's just far, far too many of them these days. All life is there.

It's fair to say that many people who spend a lot of time in virtual worlds probably have difficulty forming relationships in the real world. Certainly nearly half the sample we spoke to agreed with this statement. And we found a lot of evidence of people just wanting to make a tie - belonging, finding similar others, joining. This is especially true of places such as World of Warcraft where you become a member and part of a virtual community.

A key point about these virtual worlds is that there's no social anxiety, you're in full control. The messages you give are when you want to give them. This is a lovely quote from a male respondent in Japan:

"In virtual worlds you get to know people's real nature without knowing what they look like, in real life it's the complete opposite."

When you look at it this way, it's not surprising that 60% agreed that they visited online social communities for relaxation. Obviously, going back to my earlier point, for some porn may be a form of relaxation. But we didn't find this to be any more a dominant thread than it is in the physical world. This sense of people being able to explore who they are and become who they really are, is a far more powerful and consistent theme. That's why 70% say their online personality allows them to shine.

So is it a source for good, or for evil? In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, Putman talked about us becoming an atomised society, with fewer connections to each other or to community. We did find the occasional story that supported this theme:

"My wife and child sleep in a different room, we each have our own computer, so even though we're in the same house we sometimes have conversations online"
Japanese respondent

But overall we believe quite the opposite is happening, I think for most it's a place for therapy, catharsis, healing, sharing, interaction. 60% said online social networking helped them get more out of life.

So in conclusion, I think it's a force for good. Our research has demonstrated that people are not a different species when they access the world via their computer screen, they have the same personality traits and beliefs, but are now able to explore, experiment, express and validate the hidden complexities of their true selves. Free of the criticism and censure that sometimes depresses people in real life. For many it can also be more meaningful, more personal, more reliable and more fun.

Because of that I don't think it's going away, I think it's healthy, and I think resistance is futile.