Stitch & Split

Selves and Territories in Science Fiction

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Untitled

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www.stitch-and-split.org

Is it possible for human personalities to be recreated in computer systems? Personally, I doubt it. To create a software model of the brain and its body and environment is difficult enough even in principle, let alone in any foreseeable practice. To enable that programme to run, to iterate, to take even one step, is a difficulty of a far greater order. Perhaps I'm just being stubborn, but I remain unconvinced that it's possible at all. To claim that human personalites, with real continuity with those they've been copied from, can exist in a virtual environment raises philosophical questions far deeper than most stories on the subject even consider, and far too deep for me to go into here.

Nevertheless, I think it's worthwhile and legitimate to write science fiction stories that assume it is possible, as I've done in The Stone Canal and elsewhere. As the American SF writer Kim Stanley Robinson points out in this context, science fiction provides us with metaphors for the mundane, and for the changes in our daily lives. When aviation was changing the world, science fiction wrote about space travel. When space travel was not changing the world, and medicine and drugs were, science fiction wrote about Inner Space. When computers were changing the labour process in factories and offices, science fiction wrote about cyberspace. Now that much of our work and leisure and relationships are mediated by computer networks, and much our lives lived online, science fiction talks about 'uploading' human personalities into virtual reality. It's a metaphor for what has already happened. In emails and newsgroups, websites and weblogs, many of us - deliberately or otherwise - project an 'online persona' which has a far from simple relationship with our actual selves. How many of us have had the experience of meeting someone we have come to know online and found them quite surprisingly different from the person we had imagined? As used to be said back in the early nineties, on the Internet nobody knows you're a dog.

But it's not simply a question of dissembling, of faking an identity, of anonymity or pseudonymity. To the extent that it has real effects, on other people and on the world, your online persona is your real self. You are responsible for it. There is no evading that. And these effects can be serious, can be very much 'part of the real world'. We're often reminded of the dark side of this, in fraud and entrapment and so forth, but we should also remember the bright side. Think of Salam Pax, the famous 'Baghdad Blogger'. As a young gay man in Iraq, he was able to use the Internet to both conceal his personal identity, and to reveal it, to come out before thousands and thousands of readers - and to affect quite profoundly the way in which many people saw the war. Here for the first time was somebody writing, almost intimately, in real time, to people in the attacking countries as the bombers took off from England and he - and we - could count the hours until they arrived, and worry when his messages stopped. Think of how emails and newsgroup messages directly affected how people outside the United States experienced the September 11 attacks and their consequences - many

them anxiously seeking news of people they had never met in person, only online, but who were their friends or acquaintances nonetheless.

On the other side of the screen, so to speak, the Internet has changed many people's very personalities and identities - 'identity' this time meaning how they see themselves, and what they identify with. Again, we are often reminded of the dark side - of how people with warped and anti-social characters, ideas and impulses can find each other. But here, as in the real world, misanthropy is misguided. As the English historian Henry Thomas Buckle said, acts of virtue must far outnumber acts of vice, or humanity would long ago have perished. There are online communities of evil or disturbed people, for sure. But they are far outnumbered by the online communities of good people, whose interests are innocent. If you're innocent and isolated, discovering that you're not alone is an immense relief and can be the beginning of liberation. Minorities - sexual and political, religious and anti-religious, intellectual and artistic - can share their interests and legitimise themselves in their own eyes and those of the rest of the world. Not all of this is good, but most of it is.

Even the science-fiction idea of electronic immortality for digitized personalities is a metaphor for real life. We can't be sure, but we may suspect, that everything sent across the Internet is stored somewhere. Our newsgroup postings are now permanently archived in public, there to entertain or embarrass us for the rest of our lives. Perhaps the dark archives of the security services hold all our private messages, and represent the only immortality most of us will ever have. Who knows what intelligences, human or artificial, will in some distant future study these scraps of our souls as we study cave-paintings and bone-carvings, and wonder about the strange people who created them, back in the dawn?

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