

RESIST THEORIZING HYPE ABOUT DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY!

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Under the mask of my writing, I have to start with a confession: I am unsure if I understand Shapiro's point correctly. Perhaps the lack of ethnographical example does not help to clarify his thinking. Or it is my tired brain by hours spent immersed in the so-called metaverse which is why I am unable to precisely grasp what is at stake. But here is what I read, and how I try to connect the dots. In digital studies, one prominent line of inquiry centers on the newness of interactions and communications that are taking place within such ecosystems. And, while some scholars argue that these environments foster entirely novel modes of being, others contend that familiar, Goffmanian types of sociability persist as such or in recontextualized manners. Shapiro's position emphasizes the fragmentation of identity and the original shapes of crowds emerging from digital interfaces (plus the implications they might have in real



Figure 1 – Diving into the metaverse. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

life, another recurring theme in discussions about online worlds), in particular the increased metonymy and feelings of self-reflexivity they might trigger. Although I use a different jargon, my own perspective could align with his. I recognize that standard off-line forms of sociability dominate in virtual conditions, yet the technological mediations inherent to these might also produce distinct effects that influence the nature of (self) perception, communication and interaction in ways that have to be determined. However, if I understand Shapiro accurately, he too seems to suggest that, under the regime of cyber-datascape, the self is manufactured as a fragmented nexus of all its digital representations. And here I need to part routes.

Consider, for instance, the field of Social Virtual Reality (SVR). These are computerized immersive ecosystems where inhabitants socialize via avatars (like VRChat, a platform created in 2014 that I've explored as an anthropologist for the last two years). Interestingly, users struggle (and we do too) to define the type of experiences that are occurring in these platforms, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. At first, a great deal of participants emphasizes a clear distinction between their off-line lives and their online interactions, asserting an awareness of the boundary between the two. Yet, gradually, the same users come to identify deeply with their avatars, describing them as "second skins" they grow into and inhabit (for more on this, see Berliner and Erofeeva 2025). After a certain moment, many report looking into virtual mirrors and recognizing their pixelated representations, a fluffy pink cat or a cute anime girl for example, as extensions of themselves, exclaiming: "This is me!" But far from being "contained" in them only (to borrow Shapiro's metaphor), these electronic masks augment individual and social capacities of those who embody them, much like costumes in cosplay, live-action role-play, or theatrical performance (Berliner 2024). Although a bouquet of literature stresses self-multiplication or fragmentation in avatar identification (Turkle 1999) in a sort of theoretical hype on virtual technology, such processes of online becoming also give rise to what I refer to as "endo-experiences", experiences of inwardness that facilitate intimate expression and trigger a desire to dive into the depths of the self, considered as unified and authentic. Where Shapiro posits that users display metonymic parts of themselves into these worlds, my observations show that participants herein feel able to exhibit "true" aspects of their character. In VRChat, individuals speak about extremely personal issues, and confessions abound. As a matter of fact, these eminently relational ecosystems can foster profound social exchange and corporeal connections, forging what I would describe as a digital theatre of intimacy. Under the veil of their mask, some dare to share their torments as drug addicts, victims of sexual harassment and homo/transphobia and cancer sufferers. And do not get me wrong. These technologies can be instruments of surveillance, bad for the climate, neoliberal tools, catalysts of intolerance and identity fragmentation, but

without idealizing them they too enhance familiarity, cooperation, feeling free and a sense of personal uniqueness.

There is, however, little that is new in such dynamics. Camouflaging may facilitate expression. Avatars function as “self-skins”, a term adapted from Anzieu’s psychoanalytic concept of the *moi-peau* (1995), serving as a protective envelope for the user’s self. Avatarial fusion enables a Winnicottian dissociation from what participants see as their false identities. In a seminal study, Gergen, Gergen, and Barton (1973) demonstrated that when young adults were placed in a dimly lit room with strangers (with the promise of anonymity and no future encounters), they became notably more relaxed, emotionally eloquent, and physically affectionate, a dimension that virtual spaces might trigger as well. One could equally interpret such digital encounters as the technological continuation of a quest for personal authenticity, an ideology of *ipséité* that contemporary society has made highly valuable (Romano 2019). While technology serves to intensify this pursuit, what we observe remain largely shaped by the *longue durée* and enduring sociopsychological mechanisms, an aspect I wish Shapiro had explored further. Overall, and I write this as a reminder to my own unitary/fragmented self, one needs microscopic examinations of individuals’ interactions and communications, both online and off-line, to assert what digital interfaces actually generates in people, whether it is new forms of subjectivity or sociality. Such exploration necessitates patient and comparative ethnography aimed at uncovering representations and usages, as well as underlying processes. It also requires, I believe, leaving behind some theorizing hype about technology itself.

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