

Spring 4-4-2012

Me, You and Everybody We Know: A Hypernarrative on Digital Identity

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ME, YOU AND EVERYBODY WE KNOW: A HYPERNARRATIVE ON DIGITAL
IDENTITY

by

Ana Paula Vargas Maia

B.A., Universidade Tiradentes, 2009

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
Master of Science

College of Mass Communication and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May, 2012

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

ME, YOU AND EVERYBODY WE KNOW: A HYPERNARRATIVE ON DIGITAL
IDENTITY

By

Ana Paula Vargas Maia

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management Studies

Approved by:

Robert Spahr, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
April 4th, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

ANA PAULA VARGAS MAIA, for the Master of Science degree in PROFESSIONAL MEDIA AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT STUDIES, presented on April 4th 2012, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ME, YOU AND EVERYBODY WE KNOW: A HYPERNARRATIVE ON DIGITAL IDENTITY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Robert Spahr

Me, You and Everybody We Know is a study on the way in which digital identities develop and branch out in the age of social networking, and the effects that various platforms exercise in one's perspective of self through self-mediation. Along with the research paper, I developed a web-based narrative that explores freedom of choice for the user, allowing the public to explore and interact with the piece, and construct their own narrative and impressions on the key concepts that the piece operates. Also, this study explores and engages in various conversations about social media bias, flow of information in a networked world and its effects to the fragmentation of identity in a virtual environment.

Keywords: Identity, digital, social media, self-mediation, new media, hypernarrative.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to Tatiana and Fabricio, for keeping me sane, for keeping me strong, for keeping me laughing. These pages would not have come together if not for you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Professor Robert Spahr has been the ideal Chair. The advices, the insightful conversations and the patient encouragement helped me to complete the creation of this project. His support to my ideas are deeply appreciated.

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Me, You and Everybody We Know is a web-based narrative that merges different ideas and concepts about identity formation, social networking and nostalgia. This project attempts to provoke a reflection about how easy access to technology and the popularity of social networks facilitate the fragmentation of our identity under the presumption that it is actually helping us to better portray ourselves in a digital environment.

The construction and development of this project is based in the main points regarding self-documentation and social networking: medium bias, information flow, and nostalgia for present and fragmented identities. Each one of these points work towards building some perspective on our own identity online.

By creating a conversation between these ideas, my goal is to raise through an interactive piece questions regarding the role of a fixed structure when dictating forms of interaction; how information flows inside a self-centered communication model, and the consequences of these practices to identity construction.

These concepts relate directly to reproduction and self-documentation through digital media usage and deriving ideas such as notions of fragmented reality, format translations and embodiment in the digital arena. These are also constant elements of the discourse approached on *Me, You and Everybody We Know* and are present in the discussion developed throughout this project.

Through the use of code to create a hypertext narrative, I developed a web-based artwork that consists in an interactive website with three different pieces composing it. The user will be able to interact and navigate through the parts, having contact with different hypertext elements and key concepts to the development of this research and the artwork. The choice of making a web-

based narrative is consistent with the ideas engaged in my research, and creating a piece based on an online medium allows me to go beyond storytelling and reach the public in ways it would not be possible otherwise.

Also, by developing a narrative that is constructed based on HTML, CSS and JavaScript, making use of visual, textual and interactive means, I am able to explore relevant characteristics of a new media object, such as numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability and transcoding¹, which enhances the idea that digital platforms can and should be used not only as media, but also as the message itself.

The connection between my research and the artwork happens when I apply the thoughts and ideas of authors such as Clay Shirky, Kevin Kelly, Jaron Lanier, and other into a piece that manifests itself in different ways and directions. By being able engage with the piece through different windows and interact with the content in various ways, the user will have the chance to break down images, fill in visual gaps, reorganize elements and reflect upon key concepts that operate around issues of identity representation within it.

A hypertext is a type of digital storytelling that enables the author to go beyond the use of technology as medium. As a digital technique it allows the storyline to develop in ways that resemble a decentralized network more than in a linear narrative. This way, the user is actively engaged in a medium that enhances the speech and allows a more participatory construction of meanings.

¹ Manovich, Lev. (2001) *The language of new media* /Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

² Couldry, Nick & Curran. James. (Eds). (2003). *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a*

BACKGROUND CONCEPTS

There are many ways to describe and discuss how we arrived at today's online communication model. One of the explored in this research discusses three main events that led to the popularization of the Internet as a cheap means of communication and allowed the democratization of information sharing: wireless connections, social networking and the a new dimension inside public space that can be described as “public privatism”.

From desktop computers to smartphones, from wired connections to wireless ones, the changes in communication technology are happening both from the perspective of hardware and software, to the point that today one relies on the other to be able to develop.

Recent years have seen a fast growth in Wi-Fi networks, from cyber cafés to smartphones, wireless connections not only change the way we communicate, but also how we think of social structures. Traditional ideas about private and public spaces are now blurred in the real world and the virtual one. More than that, we now have a new dimension to integrate in our lives, one that does not rely on geography and affects most sides of our social framework. Hampton and Gupta (2008), describe a possible phenomena called “public privatism” to characterize the effect of wireless communication on community formation and an individual's relation to public space, where both private and public spheres of one's life are juxtaposed at the same place and time (p. 835-836). To understand this concept it is necessary to realize the way in which the lives of most people changed when mobile technologies were inserted into everyday life. Activities that were performed in the privacy of their homes are now happening in the public spheres, such as phone conversations, e-mail exchanges and Web browsing.

The juxtaposition of doing what was before considered private in public spaces creates this third dimension where public and private co-exist together and start blurring their limits, thi

behavior is even more when thought about inside the context of social networking. Even though it can be unclear how these new social dynamics could alter the structure of communities and societies, since it is still a matter in constant development, it is noticeable that this interaction between individuals immersed in a small private sphere inside public spaces creates a dichotomy in the conventional separation between what is public and what is private. As argued by Harris, Ling and Humphries, cited in Hampton and Gupta (2008), this dichotomy happens mostly because the person builds what the authors define as:

(...) A private 'cocoon' that reduces the likelihood of serendipitous public encounters, contradicts common expectations of public behavior and diverts attention away from co-present others (including existing social ties). The mobile phone has made it less necessary to rely on anyone other than those who are already highly familiar; 'those who have come into our sphere of friendship are always available'. (p. 835)

On top of that, with the development and popularization of social networks, what happens to online communication is a shift from a vertical communication flow, where the mainstream media is constantly broadcasting to the general public in an one-way structure, to a more horizontal model, where the information flow is self-centered and works in similar ways to a decentralized network. What used to be just an active audience now has the chance to become producers and distributors of content, and even though this shift did not overcome the mainstream media's power, at least it was able to balance the production and consumption of information online and introduce new levels to the understanding of social structure and relationship construction inside the personal sphere in the age of digital and networked communities.

On a personal level, accessible technology allied to social networking empowered one's ability to have a voice and to make it loud enough to create an audience of its own. Since the Internet and the Web are infiltrating our lives in much easier and cheaper ways, access becomes

an affordable commodity at the same time that attention span becomes a very expensive and precious one². Therefore, in order to develop an effective communication model, new values are assigned to new commodities, such as personal data, attention span and service personalization, that become the main attraction for users in major social networks. It becomes hard to argue against this model because its characteristics are rooted in the essence of every major social network, by giving power to the user, this individual becomes a producer that much like a mainstream media channel needs an audience to keep information spreading and raising the possibility of feedback. The main difference is that the way the users are communicating and sharing information is a pre-established in the structure of the network itself, instead of defined by them, it is being shaped according to the interests of the companies running these networks, which are usually economic reasons.

The basic problem raised with this conclusion is how democratic can a network be if it is dictating from the beginning the way its users should behave. By imposing a communication structure, the network is also determining how information should flow, and from that creating an automated and incomplete experience for the users that generate gaps between their real identities and their digital ones.

My project explores what happens to the user's understanding about online identity construction when you take away the fixed structure and the linear flow of information to create a more free and creative exploration about identity. Enabling the creation of new mediations leads to new perspectives, therefore, eliminating the restraining boxes and “call for action” options that exist in popular social networks, my purpose is to exchange it for a more intuitive and subjective narrative that explores and reflects upon the ideas previously exposed, where the

² Couldry, Nick & Curran. James. (Eds). (2003). *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a*

user is able to explore three different dimensions and perspectives inside one piece. The first one explores concepts of self, a reflection upon our own identity, ideas connected to how we mediate ourselves, what are the gaps or the parts that compose the idea of “me” and digital identity and how the bias of social networks is changing it. The second dimension is exploring the relationship of the other, how we perceive a third part and vice-versa, and it connects to the notion that even in a fixed structure that determines the flow of information, not everything can be seen or understood about someone, and that the moment users realize this, the whole concept of a system or network falls apart. On the third and last part, *Me, You and Everybody We Know* reflects on the collective, the space where a user can have access to a large quantity of information, but in the end it is just an ephemeral interaction with the material.

Therefore, in order to align my research interests with the creative project, it is necessary to understand how the growth of the online community and the increasing availability of technology transformed our notions of identity construction and personal relations. Once these ideas are clear it is possible to investigate how network bias and information flows can alter one's perception of self through a nostalgic behavior online.

With self-mediation, users have the chance to reinvent themselves in an online environment, reconfiguring and re-coding their identities as it may fit. For most of users, it means being part of a larger community, where the search for new roles in society takes place. And often by understanding new possibilities, the users have the chance to change conventional ideas about their places inside a community or a society, becoming engaged with matters that they would not be able to do so otherwise.

One of the downsides of this experience is that after a while, when an individual is already established inside an online community, the structure of major social networks leaves

little to no space for this user to reinvent herself. Small pieces capturing all sorts of information about someone composes an extended profile of someone that by no means can really represent the whole of one's personality, that when added to the constant watch of others and even an overflow of unnecessary information, the user contemplates an incomplete experience.

It is focusing on this incomplete experience and the gaps that exist because of the way in which social networking is operating in recent years that *Me, You and Everybody We Know* develops its criticism towards how the Web is closing itself for new possibilities in the hopes of building global communities, but disregarding the need for different models inside the Internet itself, where users can actually choose between distinguished options that fit their needs, even if that means creating one of their own.

NARRATIVE AND TECHNIQUES

Me, You And Everybody We Know is a non-linear interactive web-based narrative. It is constructed from the standpoint of three different perspectives that explores concepts surrounding the idea of a user thinking about the construction of her own identity online. This hypertext narrative not only attempts to ask the user what does she think about her own fragmented notion of identity, but also plays with the idea of the other and the collective, that together contribute with pieces to complete this notion of what does it mean to have bits and bytes of yourself spread online. In order to develop a piece that is tight with the ideas researched in this paper, each of the parts inside the piece explores the main themes in the paper as well as concepts that operate around these ideas.

Me

The first option presented for the user to begin the piece is a first-person perspective on identity exploration. The proposed reflection operates around the way that major social networking websites are modifying personal storytelling, and how the user feels about having a notion of identity that is composed of cut-up from various environments and the contrast between the perception that one has of herself and the perspective formed after the act of self-mediation.

To create this intensified sense of fragmentation; the user is faced with an image that is cut in many pieces, creating the aspect of super-sized pixels with gaps between them that prevent the user from seeing the complete image.

In this section of the narrative, the main concept is to explore everything that is being left out of the users digital identity because of social network bias. Since the media bias defines the way information will flow, it is also defining what kind of information is relevant and what is not. For most networks, having information that could classify the user in a qualitative manner is a valuable resource, mostly because it allows this network to generate revenue from the personal data given by the users. For the user, this same amount of information seen in a first-person perspective creates an accurate profile of the person, but does not capture the essence that makes each person unique and relevant in a community.

In a sense, this first part of the hypernarrative attempts to raise reflection upon the recurrent theme in identity and technology studies that is personal value, described by Shirky (2010) “is the kind of value we receive from being active instead of passive, creative instead of consumptive ” (p. 172), which relates to the notion that the more active we are online, the more personal value we have, but also raises the issue of this value being more useful to us as individuals or to the companies running the networks we are inserted in.

You

By choosing the second option to start the navigation, the user is able to explore another dimension that operates around self-documentation, the perspective of the other about oneself and vice-versa. In this part the user is confronted with ideas about information flow and nostalgic behaviors, inside a reflection about how can one person be different from the other, be unique and original when all of the content produced and distributed is contained inside the same aesthetic format. This also raises the issues of how being trapped inside boxes and fixed options

creates a conflict of interest with what the user wants to and what the network allows her to do, how to express herself and how far is she able to tweak and change it when trying to create an authentic representation of her identity.

To illustrate these ideas, the user is led to a page that resembles a set of notes with small pieces of information and personal notes that once the user attempts to explore it falls apart. The page is still navigable but its elements are disorganized and sometimes even hidden, which allows the user to move the pieces around the screen and reposition them as she wishes to, playing with the notion that once a fixed structure is disassembled, the user gains freedom to reorganize it in any order it wishes to do so.

Also in this section of the piece, the user has contact with explorations on nostalgic behavior and how this behavior influences the construction of digital identities. With the possibility of on going self-documentation and real time publishing and sharing, the act of documenting the present or the near past has become more common. Linking this kind of behavior to nostalgia studies developed by Frederic Jameson³, the concept of “nostalgia for present” is applied in the age of social networking as the way in which one might think of the present as a possible and likely past, basing her wish to rewrite or revisit this past in the idealized form that it has taken as digital media, rather than in actual happenings or memory. *With Me, You and Everybody We Know* this reflection takes place inside the boxes that carry photos, text, videos that may represent the arrangement of one's life in the digital format, but inside the piece, the user has the chance to organize, hide or uncover this fragment of past.

³ Jameson, Fredric. ([1999], c199) *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism* /Durham: Duke University Press,

Everybody We Know

When the user chooses the third and last navigation option to enter the piece, once more there is a perspective shift. This time the narrative digs into the exploration of community representation and one's experience inside the collective. To investigate this aspect it is taken in consideration the transformations that occurred in the structure and understanding of communities, the lack of necessity for a geographic position, but the constant need of online engagement mostly everywhere we go. The goal is to raise issues of how looking at the world through multiple screens and windows, everywhere and nowhere at the same time, creates a incomplete experience for all users. At the same time that social networks can be very egocentric, they can also be about what everybody else is doing and somehow inviting the user to participate disregard her possibilities of doing so.

To explore these gaps in one's experience, the user is confronted with a mosaic composed by many small images that take all the space in the browser, and once the user attempts to interact with it, the images can be magnified, creating the impression of a overflow of visual information where you can even have access to it in details to some extent, but there are still some gaps that cannot be filled only by browsing and looking at it. This evokes the notion of how fragmented identities behave in virtual environments, especially when they are multiplied by many and all of them occupy the same space. The user is confronted with an ephemeral interaction with the material, but not with the reality and the essence that this piece represents outside the small frame that it occupies in the digital arena.

The Code

To develop this hypertext, I coded several one-page pieces that are connected by the subject and the specific concepts outlined in the previous items. The main idea is that the use of code to construct a text enables the narrative to resemble a network, rather than dealing with a linear progression of the text.

By employing the use of HTML5, CSS3 and JavaScript, it is possible to generate an interactive piece that can be easily accessed and browsed with little to no restriction, independent from the browser that it is being accessed through. The development of a hypertext to illustrate this research is not only obvious because of the subject that is being investigated, but it is also a way of thinking how does the Internet and the Web affect storytelling as a whole.

Since the objective of the piece is to lead the user to different lines of thinking about self-presentation outlining the discussions that happen in this research paper, it is not my intention to have a personalized or completely random experience, but to expand the understanding of the user in a non-linear and non-conventional discussion.

When creating a virtual environment that deals with matters of representation and identity but does not work in a logical way, instead it encourages the user to freely explore its content, I am trying to make a point about the discovery of new spaces, ways and maybe even parts of the user's own identity that might not be known by her yet. Even though *Me, You and Everybody We Know* is not a call for action or an opposition towards the existing models of networking sites, I am concerned with creating an active response from and for the user, that may be expressed in the form of self-reflection and deeper understanding of the virtual world she participates in.

Methods

As the research develops and questions are raised, many times there is the confrontation between different beliefs and approaches to the subjects discussed in his paper by the various authors used as references. My main goal with the research paper and the hypertext is to find a common balance between the ideas explored by these authors and my own, attempting to reach a logical conclusion about the issues raised both in the piece and the paper. For the conduction of the research, different authors are used to explore each one of the ideas, constructing a dialogue that is reproduced in *Me, You and Everybody We Know*.

In order to understand how the structure of social networking media work towards building a flat, fixed and homogeneous platform for all users, I discuss the contrast between Clay Shirky's⁴ optimism in creating a global and networked community that has a high value to society, and the importance of a flexible Web that allows space for transformation and multiplicity, as written by Larry Gross⁵ when talking about the Web as a place for identity discovery and acceptance.

When exploring the concepts of information flow and how nostalgic behaviors are transferred to digital environments, the discussion operates around the keywords “remediation” and “reconfiguration” of digital media, following the definitions given by Lievrouw (2011), and how they can be revealing when inserted into the context of social networks as we are accustomed to, especially because these are concepts that are tightly connected with notions of self-mediation and the role played by Web tools in this process. To complement Lievrouw's

⁴ Shirky, Clay. (2010) *Cognitive surplus: creativity and generosity in a connected age*. New York: Penguin Press,

analysis, Lanier's (2010) thoughts are inserted to create a critical element in the conversation, and expand the argument that contrary to what Shirky (2010) proposes, users are losing personal value and important identity details just to build a online community that may enhance the idea of a networked world, but also does not leave space for users to reinvent themselves, or even create a digital persona that reflects their offline ones.

To conclude the final part of the discussion that relates directly with how social media bias, fixed information flows and nostalgic behaviors online can fragment notions of identity, the discussion takes on Rodriguez (2001) ideas on how new media can reconfigure one's concept of self and her place inside a community, complemented with Manovich's (2001) *Principles of New Media*, which discuss how new media tools must be flexible and adaptable according to the users interests, being that something that does not happen in social networks, also contributing to the argumentation that these platforms do not collaborate in a positive way to self-presentation practices.

In the final statement of this research paper, Kevin Kelly's (2010) approach on where technology is heading in the future will be used to not only end the discussion, but also point out that the way social networks operate today is highly counter-intuitive if his argument is considered a valuable path to be taken by the technology field.

Also it is worth noting that Manovich's (2010) *Principles of New Media* are a large influence in the composition of *Me, You and Everybody We Know* since the piece is thought of to be adaptable for different media, exploring different formats and ideas that can be presented in various configurations. The idea that gave birth to the concept of the piece is a personal intention of creating a narrative that can be experienced and interpreted in different ways, allowing the

⁵ Couldry, Nick & Curran. James. (Eds). (2003). *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a*

user to take control of the main pieces of the artwork by navigating, exploring and arranging it in any desired way. In a sense, allowing the user to interact and navigate in any way desired, also gives her the opportunity to develop impressions of her own. This way the user is presented with three entry choices in the piece, and each one of them presents different perspective and resources that operate around the idea of digital identity construction. Also, the public is able to explore, change and reorganize the piece in various forms, and navigate the website horizontally, building their on perspective and even narrative.

RESEARCH PROCESS

Personal experiences and perspectives inspired this research and the idea for the creative project. My goals and interests are oriented towards understanding how someone re-codifies her own identity, with changes in technology and communication influencing the way society behaves and interacts with the world, as explained by Rodriguez (2001, p. 3), meaning that most often than not, when presented to a new medium, one might be able to rethink her position inside the reality that she is inserted in, which allows this person to change her roles inside a community or society, and even reinvent her identity and roles at the same time that new perspectives are created.

In order to accomplish this goal, it is necessary to investigate and discuss the ways in which virtual environments affect how a user remediates herself and constructs a digital identity. Also, it is important to analyze how the popularization of technology generated a shift on how users see their roles inside society, since the possibility of remediation created a new perspective on their identity and their role, that changed from a mere audience to a participative public. This shift enhanced self-centered information flows, elevated users to the status of producers and distributors of content, allied to the advent of social networks these characteristics are now enhanced and glorified.

In the pursuit of creating cyberspaces where these aspects were improved in a way to come up with an all personalized and unique experience for the user, where she could build an entire network that would fit her every need in terms of information sharing, what the user has now is a space where public and private lives are as blurred as real and virtual ones, personal

data is a valuable asset and the user's experience is unsatisfactory when compared to the price paid by the user: her attention span and very detailed pieces of information from her life.

To explore these issues relating to identity studies is to discuss what technology is doing to us rather than what it is doing for us. There is a whole new field to expand on how these experiences challenge conventional notions of identity, how social networks are not only fragmenting these perspectives, but also creating new ones and pushing us to do so inside a fixed format that allows no significant change at all.

Social Media Bias

In order to understand how an overflow of information is generated as a product of a nostalgic behavior reinforced by the structure of social networks and the fluidity offered by them as broadcasting platforms, it is necessary to investigate how and why these networks are built that way. It is understood in this research that different networks work in different ways, and since it is not a personal interest to explore specific websites, but the general way in which all of them work, specific examples will be avoided.

The general format that major social media tools like Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Wordpress and Wikipedia are leaning towards is a dynamic experience where the user can post, edit and access information anywhere inside them. Unlike Google's products, these networks are interested in maintaining their users inside their main website, providing in their framework the necessary resources a user would possibly need to enhance their experience and build a rich and extensive profile. But as discussed by Shirky (2010), the relevant message transmitted by these networks is that everyone can participate as a producer and distributor of content when being

part of them. These networks allow to fill the existing gap between doing something and doing nothing, and fortify the idea that the smallest and most insignificant creative act is ultimately still a creative act (Shirky, 2010, p. 18-19). The ideas exposed by the author can show us how the element of individuality is important to create unique perspectives and multiple interpretations instead of sustaining and perpetuating the idea of a collective that is not only bigger, but also more important than one standing alone. The main issue that can be seen in this scenery is the lack of balance between these two ends, which is leading to the construction of organism that may be fluid and natural, but is substituting individualism for a faceless experience where the user is only as important as her contribution to the community.

With the reinvention of the “Do-It-Yourself”, the producing and sharing of any sorts of content in digital formats became a creative act as much as it is a social act (Shirky, 2010, p. 19). In this sense, different platforms suggest different content or sharing habits, so even though the creative speech is formulated in a free way, how the user is going to present it to her public is already predetermined by the bias of the network.

This line of thinking leads us to the idea that even though the user has the power to create, share and publicize any content inside her interest, the ways in which this is going to happen are already set. Information comes in boxes, pre-set layouts, with predetermined buttons, links and options, what leaves no space for the user to decide how a given content should be released online.

When users are locked down inside a fixed structure, this can generate an unwillingness to produce, create and imagine life outside a virtual box. From producers, users become mindless distributors of content, they loose the ability of re-inventing their surroundings, even if virtual, and from democratic platforms that would shift the conventional perspectives of content

creation, users are left with a faceless structure that is supposed to be a loyal representation of who they are and what is their role in this virtual space, but can become nothing more than a repetitive overflow of unnecessary information.

This way, existing inside a social network that alters the experience of the user in such a harsh way becomes incomplete. While networks are shaped to keep users from full personalization and framework freedom, issues regarding digital identity will continually come up with something unresolved in the age of networked relationships.

Information Flow

Since information flow in a network has its structure based in the framework of the network itself, when this same structure is constructed in a way that cannot be altered by the user, two important aspects of new media tools are compromised: remediation and reconfiguration. As explained by Lievrouw (2011), “reconfiguration is the ongoing process by which people adapt, reinvent, reorganize, or rebuild media technologies as needed to suit their various purposes and interests”, while “remediation is the process by which people construct new meanings and expressions out of existing and novel forms of interaction, social and institutional relationships, and cultural works” (p. 216-217).

This means that while major social network websites are good places to share and distribute content, they lack the ability of becoming something other than that, a new media object itself, rather than a medium through which information only flows, citing Lievrouw (2011), it is essential “to move away from a view of 'media' as relatively fixed, stable, and depersonalized institutional entities that exert effect *on* people, in order to focus on what people

do *with* media to engage with communication systems and each other” (p. 5), meaning that new media should not only be a tool to spread message, but it is important for the user to have the chance to transform new media in the message itself, generating individual and collective engagement without setting aside important characteristics of these individuals or groups.

In an age where identity must be seen as something flexible and multiple, locking down the user to a few possibilities of how to express herself seems counter-intuitive, since from the beginning the Web is known to be an environment where identities can be tested, transformed, and discovered, as discussed by Gross when the author claims that:

In contrast to most other modern media the Internet offer opportunities for individual engagement both as senders and receivers, permitting the coalescing of interest-based networks spanning vast distances. The potential for friendship and group formation provided by the Internet is particularly valuable for members of self-identified minorities who are scattered and often besieged in their home surroundings. A brief tour of the Web will reveal countless sites devoted to specialized interests that draw like-minded participants across national and international boundaries (as cited in Couldry and Curran, 2003, p. 260).

From hardware to software, technology is built to enable and enhance this multiplicity, and by avoiding these aspects the users are left with a great quantity of creative surplus that does not represent their whole identity, just small preferences and pieces of information that elevate the status of the network of a functioning system, and not the user as an important and unique cell of this structure.

The concept of a cloud network, where every user contributes to the formation of an organic arrangement is extremely tempting, because it leans towards the intention of democratic knowledge and accessibility, but when misguided, it can also mean the abdication of self and the small details that makes each and every person unique.

Contrary to the way identity and personality are expressed in the material world, digital identity does not have a conscience of its own, what happens is that users get used to “create

successful online fictions about themselves” (Lanier, 2010, p. 71). At this point, the real person starts to incorporate the previously created digital self, other than the opposite because, as described by Lanier (2010), creating shades of grey in real life is easier than asking a program to do so (p. 71).

In this scenery, what occurs is that by not being able to have the presence of these shades of grey online, users become heavily dependent on the options offered by social networks, which ends up closing the possibility of creating a persona that actually resembles what someone can be offline. Also, this comes to an important conclusion of what digital representation online can cause when thought of inside the reality of social networks, identity representation is directly linked to the tools that are being used, and if these tools limit personal expression, then identity issues seen in these cases are related to how information flows. If the structure of a network does not allow the users to have full control over their ways of expression, their experiences will be incomplete, as well as their identities.

Nostalgia For Present

To be able to discuss how the Web incites a nostalgic behavior and its relation to identity construction, it is necessary to understand the ways in which technology interferes with our identity on different levels, from the interaction with a computer, to self-presentation online. Also, how this self-presentation is structured and conducted by a certain pre-established path set up by social networks, leading to the fragmentation of digital identities and its effects on the users' experiences.

From time to time, societies are presented with new technologies that change their behaviors and influence the way we live, communicate and build relationships. It is naïve to believe that it is possible to analyze how computers and networked communication changed social structures without relating it to other technologies and developing on top of these ideas and concepts.

Different from television or radio, a computer presents similar physical structure, but allows a certain interaction that was not present in these other technologies. Adding the possibility of connecting one machine to a cloud of information and build new relationships and access previously unknown sources of information adds a whole new level to the experience; creating a new kind of connection to the computer as an object and a window to a different environment.

This new environment is one that not only enables multi-tasking, but also the co-existence of various spheres of one's life, which allows the user to be have access to portions of these spheres at the same time. With the insertion of social networks as tools to gather these spheres, what happens is the formation of virtual spaces that make possible the user's interaction with all of these social circles in the same place. This way, it can be said that these networks become spaces where past and present directly connect with one another, where the translation process between real and analogue life with virtual and digital life is enhanced; and a nostalgic behavior is developed in stronger and more outstanding ways.

The concept of “nostalgia for present” was explained by Frederic Jameson (1963) as the question of how could the present and the future be written if society heavily relies on nostalgic feelings for the past rather than history and reality. This concept is applied in this research as an attempt to explain how social networks enhance the idea that digital identities are built by

constantly documenting the near past, as if all these small portions of reality translated to digital content could rewrite one's existence in virtual space. This also causes the user to treat all present happenings as a likely past, amplifying the constant need for self-documentation.

Fragmented Identities

Digital identities are not only fragmented because users are constantly divided between devices, windows, tabs and networks. Identity fragmentation occurs because users have to reconcile two different perspectives at the same time, the real and the virtual. When reality is not satisfactory enough, “nostalgia for present” takes place, users long for the feeling that their real lives can simulate their virtual spaces, and the juxtaposition of different new media tools attempts to fill the gaps that exist.

Computers and networks provide instant access to the past, no matter how long ago, as long as it was somehow logged. It is through images, texts and videos that users attempt to connect with a certain moment that cannot be reached anymore. But technology masks this aspect of nostalgia; it opens up a window so users can touch something that it is not really there, creating a dichotomy in the way time and space are perceived, and the illusion that past can always happen again, be simulated and incorporated into our lives.

Another aspect that contributes to this fragmentation process is how social networks are built and administered. For economic reasons, a given networks will commoditize information collected from their users to generate revenue. In a networked world, attention and information became valuable resources, which means that having a completely personalized framework in which the users only has access to information that are valuable to them becomes an obstacle for

the economic development of the network. From this standpoint, the attempt of self-representation online has one more noise added to the experience, one that directly interferes with the other's reflection upon a user's identity. This means that ultimately, it does not matter the kind of relationships and perspectives that the user was able to construct for her own, because her participation is being measured by numbers and values.

For the final discussion of this research, all these elements come together to interact with the ideas proposed in the web-based narrative and discuss them in a deeper manner how *You, Me and Everybody We Know* works as a string to different ideas on self-presentation, documentation and digital identity when contrasted to what is offered by the existing social networks.

CONCLUSION

The Incomplete Experience

In order to tell that an experience is incomplete, the experience itself has to exist and be compared with other models or concepts. In the case of this research paper, there are contrasting ideas being explored inside the same context. To claim that the existing experience of the construction of digital identity inside recent models of social networking it was necessary to raise questions about how these networks were influencing and/or limiting the construction of self. But criticizing this model usually implies on presenting new solutions, but that is not the goal of this research, neither is the goal of the artwork developed around the ideas explored here.

To suggest a new model leads to the path where systems and platforms will be substituted by new ones, that just like the previous will be incomplete and may suit the variety of interests that exist inside this ever growing networked society. In the times that we live, rather than trying to create new alternatives that substitute the operative ones is necessary to create flexibility, multiplicity, and spaces that can be modified by user to adapt her interests, but that can also coexist with the kind of networking that is already working.

As argued by Kelly (2010), knowing what technology really wants from its users may be a tricky task, but exercising different parts of this organic structure can result in better answers than the ones that are showing up with the current practices. Allowing the Web to exercise freedom allows personalization, which leads to a natural development towards collaboration and mutualism with forcing users to handle over their information, personal data and individualism for purely economic reasons, instead allows them to indulge in a system that is transparent,

letting that the already existing symbiosis between people and technology becomes more fluid and less unnatural (p. 311-313), to the point where sharing a memory with web-based tools such as Google and Twitter will no longer be seen as an extra activity to be done while connected, but instead will be a necessary practice to keep track of real life.

In a sense, this is the kind of fluidity and openness that my work and research attempt to reach in form of a reflection upon what exists and what could exist if the Internet and the Web were seen in a more organic manner, instead of replacing these two objects for fixed concepts that are constantly repeated across various platforms. This act generates a permanent struggle between networks trying to encompass each other's characteristics or substitute the user's need for one particular system or structure, leading to redundant networks with information overflows.

Me, You and Everybody We Know is a particular view on these issues, a manifesto about how online practices that have much more interest in other details than to supplement real needs of individuals and communities are changing our relation with reality, identity construction and the technology itself. By exploring each of the sections of the piece, the user is invited and challenged to think about her surroundings, to look in a mirror and be asked what does she sees reflected and to explore the Web beyond what is presented by her, creating new experiences and thoughts that, hopefully will be taken into consideration and even transformed into actions.

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APPENDICES

Me, You and Everybody We Know

The images features in this section are screenshots of the original piece Me, You and Everybody We Know, that can be found in the following website:

<http://mypage.siu.edu/anapaula/digitalidentity>

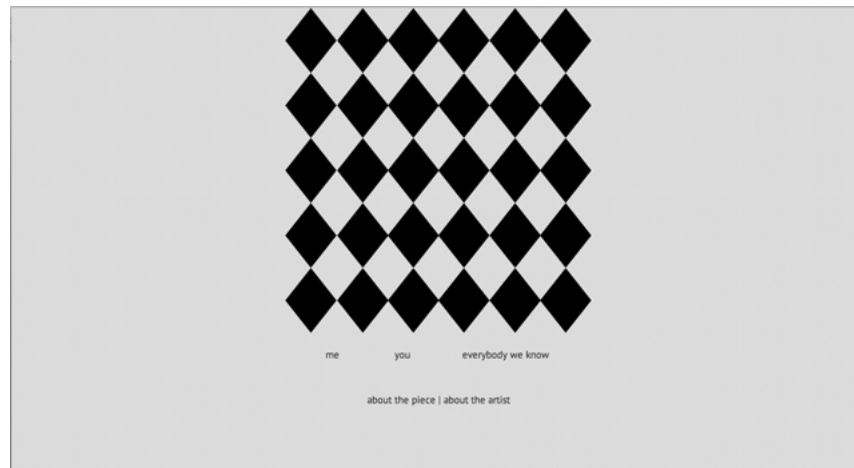


Figure 1

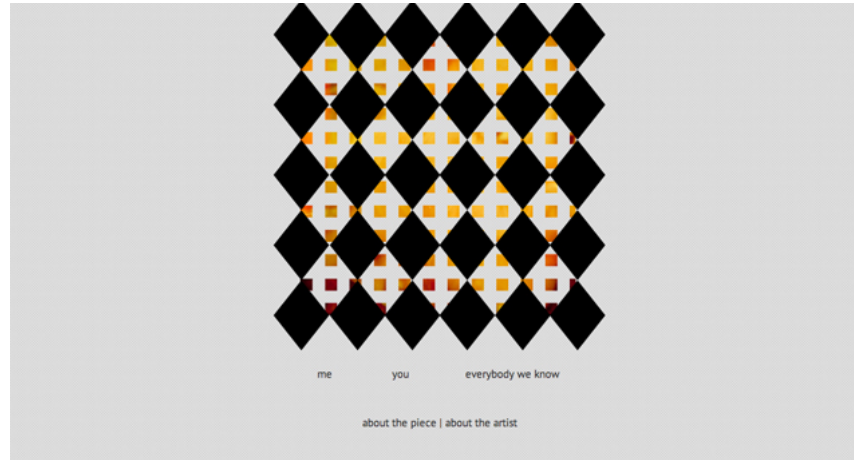


Figure 2

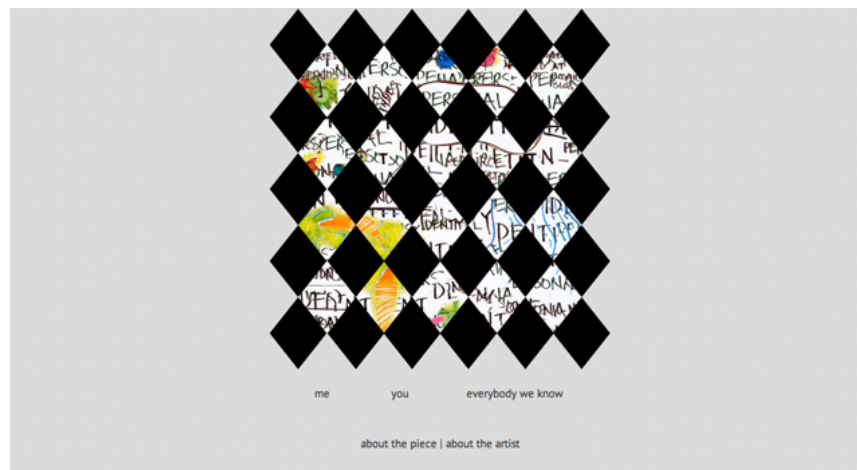


Figure 3

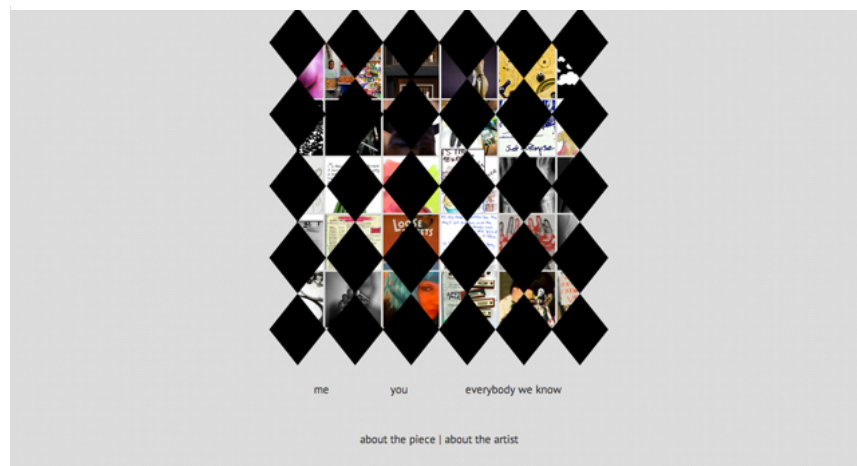


Figure 4

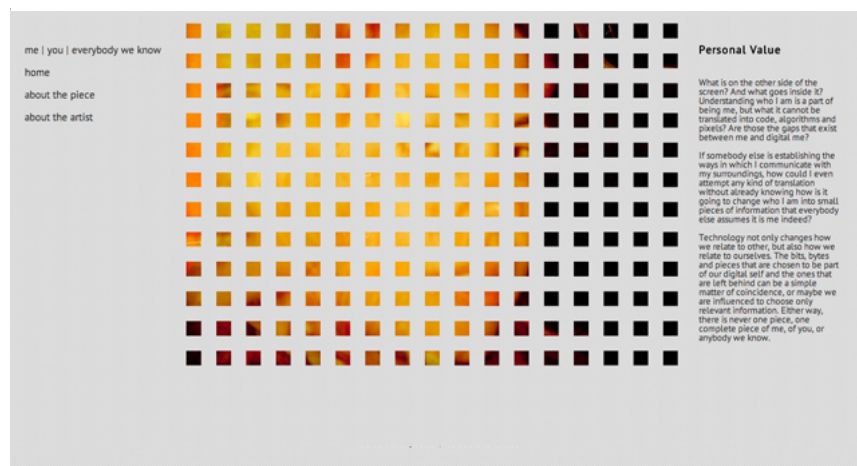


Figure 5

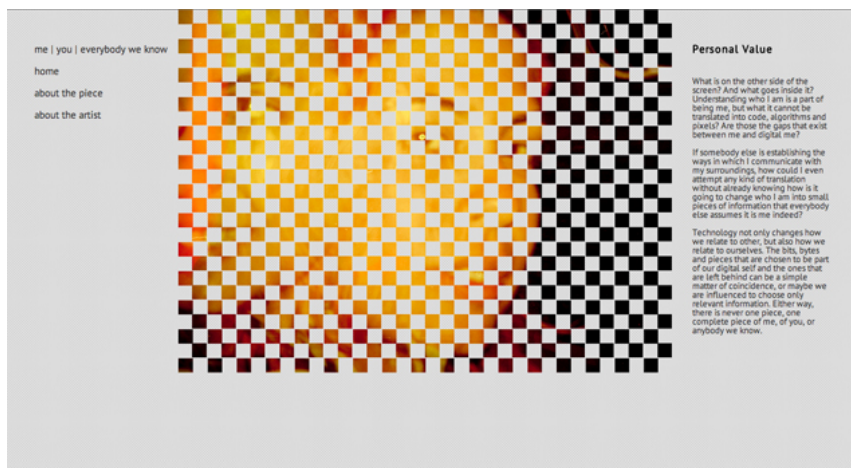


Figure 6

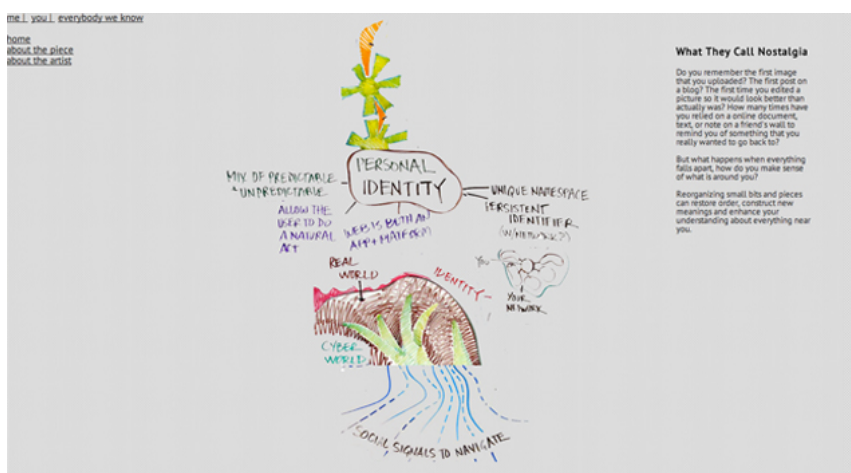


Figure 7

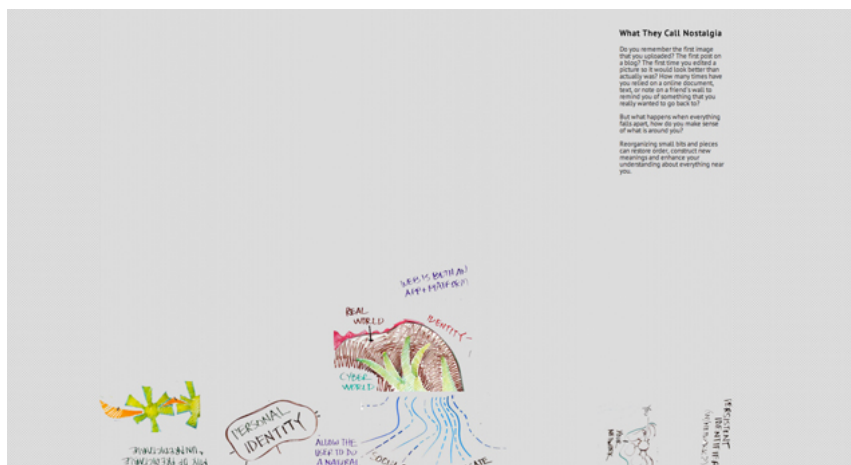


Figure 8

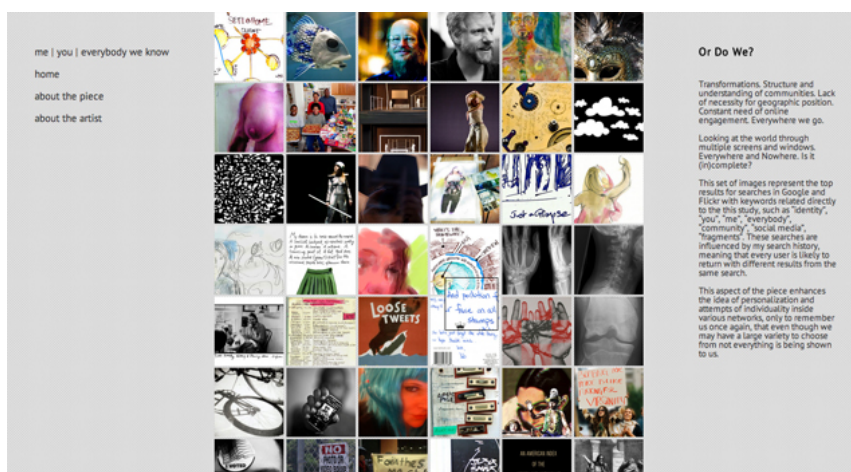


Figure 9

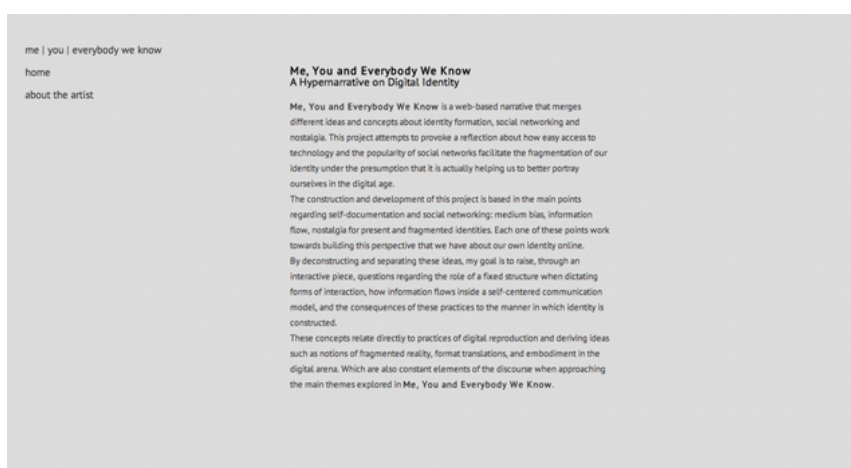


Figure 10



Figure 11

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Me, You and Everybody We Know: A Hypernarrative on Digital Identity

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