MA Photography
Critical Context Paper

Is This a Real Life? Is This Just fantasy? : A Photographic Exploration of Virtual Reality

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Introduction

The imagery this paper supports looks into the duality of the lives of those that spend a large proportion of their lives immersed in online virtual social environments. This is not by any means solely a male preoccupation (although 85% of online game players are reportedly male – Daedalus Gateway http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus) but it has traditionally been a male pastime and I do believe men / boys have a propensity to be attracted by this culture.

It is difficult to approach the subject of gender roles from an objective point if view. We are all either male or female and approach the topic with a lifetime of associated experiences, but I do believe that men's' place within society has changed significantly in the last two generations or so becoming less defined, less certain. Men can easily feel marginalized and detached from society's "norm" and it does seem that, unlike women, men lack an natural emotional support network from their friends and colleagues and indeed from an early age are often encouraged to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. So when stress and anxiety inevitably build up there is no obvious or acceptable outlet at hand. Many, I believe, find the escapism offered by a more predictable online virtual existence a very tempting alternative.

Many of the issues discussed in this paper affect online participants of virtual reality of either gender and are centred around the question:

How can you deal photographically with how people engage with virtual reality?

In order to answer this question we need to break it down and investigate; how we effectively document reality; the question of what virtual reality is and how we engage with it; and how we document this experience of a non-physical concept?

I will aim firstly to look at how imagery is used to portray the real world, showing how artists manipulate their medium to express their own view of reality.
I will then go on to describe the virtual environment and investigate why so many find it not only rewarding but also often more satisfying than the real world. Introducing my own imagery as an attempt to document the boundary between the two. Intentionally referencing the aesthetic of 3D computer generated worlds and video games, the images instead depict scenes and trigger points that underline the lack of a traditional, predictable male role.

Why use this type of imagery ?

Why not use conventional photography to show players seated in front of computer monitors or wearing virtual reality headsets? It is not simply my intention to show the mechanism of interaction but how we emotionally partition our lives to accommodate both the physical and virtual realities. Although the images are constructed and do not use traditional photography I do believe this technique can be used as a documentary tool.

This line between the graphic and the photographic, the real and the unreal, is becoming increasingly fluid as technology allows us to create photographic style imagery entirely from data within the computer without the existence of any real world referent.

During the 170 years or so of traditional chemical based photography a reliance and blasé acceptance of its reputation for truthful documentation grew;

“casually generated truthful reports about things in the real world, and which could be confidently distinguished from more traditionally crafted images, which seemed notoriously ambiguous and uncertain human constructions”. (Mitchell 1992 p.225)

But this association with the truth and the “real” has meant that photography has always been open to the possibility of “dishonest” manipulation, whereby the photographer or retoucher can create the illusion of a false reality.

There are many examples stretching back through the history of the medium;

- the nineteenth century photographer Camille Silvy often manipulated his negatives for both aesthetic and political reasons.(see fig.1 “River Scene 1858” a staged photograph created from two retouched negatives with the gentrified bourgeoisie in the private garden on one bank and the common people on the rough ground on the opposite bank).
- Stalin ordered the removal of Trotsky’s image from many photographs as he saw him as a political threat.
- Bill Brandt’s Picture Post series on Elephant and Castle Underground station from 1940. He photographed sleeping Londoners as they sheltered from the bombing during the Blitz and retouched out anyone who was awake so as to give the impression that he, alone, was walking through the slumbering masses. Brandt also used his brother and sister-in-law as models whom he posed in many of his social documentary images.
- During the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995 both Time Magazine and Newsweek used the same image of Simpson for their covers, although that used by Time was heavily manipulated to make him appear far more sinister.(see fig.2).

The advent of the computer and digital manipulation and visualisation has made it increasingly easy for contemporary photographers / artists such as Loretta Lux, Jeff

Wall, Craig Kalpakjian or the Russian collective A,E,S and F to create their own unique realities.

Leaving the constraints of chemical based photography altogether and entering the "post-photographic" era, we should examine the two principle technologies at the heart of this revolution; digital capture and 3D computer generated imagery (CGI).

Digital Capture

You could argue that there is no difference in capturing an image on a digital sensor to doing so on a piece of film especially if the film can be scanned and made into a digital file. But capturing digitally is essentially a stage further on from the mechanical reproduction of Walter Benjamin (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction 1935), there is no authentic original but it "…lies in a virtual space, and in an implicit world which evolves within the flow of hypermedia – layered, relational and constantly shifting in content and context, depending on the behaviour and consciousness of the viewer" (Roy Ascott 2007 p.253). The camera transcribes the real world visual referent into binary data common to all digital media; audio, video etc; this allows for it's unprecedented integration and interactivity.

The simple, cheap and effective transmission and distribution of images is now possible as digital files are infinitely reproducible with no subsequent reduction in quality and with the internet as a mass distribution network this has led to the proliferation of photo-sharing websites; Flickr, MySpace, Facebook etc. (almost 9 million images being uploaded to Facebook daily (BBC)).

Images can be displayed to an almost limitless audience at effectively no cost and this is beginning to change the role and practice of traditional photojournalism. Instead of established photographers being commissioned to travel to the source of

the news, bystanders are able to “publish” their own images via image sharing sites Image manipulation is now possible to such a degree as to suggest that photography has lost it’s link to the “real” world altogether; “computer manipulation means that it’s no longer possible to believe that a photograph represents a specific object in a specific place at a specific time” (Lipkin 2005 p.4). The photograph is no longer necessarily a trace of the real, no indexical imprint. I’ll return to this later.

Computer Generated Imagery (CGI)

This is demonstrated further when we examine computer generated imagery. Instead of a photograph’s digital data being created from the sensor within the camera, similar code is generated using computer software, but based on how real light interacts with real world geometry. If a photograph is broadly the “encoding of reflected light” (Elkins 2007 p.153) what is created then is not merely an image but an actual simulated photograph from the viewpoint of a fully functional virtual camera in a three dimensional virtual space. This allows for the merging of the synthesized and the real to create the illusion of a traditional photograph using both photographic and computer generated elements. (see fig.3 in which a 3d model of a car has been incorporated into a traditional location photograph. Also fig.4 where a computer generated gallery space has the photoreal appearance of a real world installation). It is, therefore, now possible to free the photograph from it’s traditional role of recording the real world.

Although working backwards in effect we can now recreate the real world as a virtual space as Microsoft have recently developed Photosynth, “scene recognition technology” (Microsoft) in which many images, in the public domain, of a similar scene are automatically scanned and mapped in order to produce a computer reconstruction of the scene in three dimensions. This seems like the ultimate development of Renaissance perspectival imaging.

In many ways there is a continuous line of evolution dating from the sixteenth century Cartesian style of Western perspective drawing, through the “photographic era” when technology first allowed us to fix the camera obscura image to the “post photographic” era when we can create a simulated environment and for the first time have the flexibility to view it from any desired viewpoint. Incidentally Lawrence Roberts referred to 18th century German perspectival geometry textbooks when he published the first paper on computer perspective algorithms in 1963.

But it’s not photography is it?

That a computer generated image is both constructed and appears as if it is photographic is important in how we read and decode it as a document of the real.

I would just like to examine the indexical quality of photographs, how this fits in with Vilem Flusser’s writing on the traditional (i.e. Non photographic) image and how these principles are drawn out in realist and photo-realist painting. If photography is the last word in realism then what place has realist painting?

“A photograph is a sign (index) carried by the light reflected off the objects it represents” (Lipkin 2005 p4). Photographs are often referred to as being indexical, a term originating from Canadian philosopher Charles Peirce’s trichotomy of signs; icon, index, symbol (Division of Signs (1932)) as a further development on the discussions on semiotics of Saussure. A footprint in the snow is a trace of recent human presence – and index is a signifying mark, bearing connection to the thing it represents and being physically caused by the referent. A photograph may be any of these three types of sign, but it is as the index that seems to establish it’s inherent connection with the real, an authentic trace. Or as Barthes writes, “the referent adheres to the photograph” (Barthes 1980 p80).

The photograph has a direct link to the world it represents, a chemical “trace” of the real. The camera indiscriminately takes in all that is placed in front of it, and therefore maybe considered the perfect vehicle for objective documentation. Or can it? Vilem Flusser in his book “Towards a Philosophy of Photography” expresses serious concerns accepting photography as the ultimate tool for portraying the “real” and warns us of uncritically accepting photographs at face value as a “truthful” representation. He describes the camera as being an apparatus; a machine pre-programmed in it’s functions due to the constraints and physical limitations of the process of photography. “It looks as if photographers could choose freely, as if their cameras were following intention. But the choice is limited to the categories of the camera, and the freedom of the photographer is a programmed freedom” (Flusser 1983 p.35). These limitations or programs being the predetermined reliance on shutter speeds, aperture setting, depth of focus, lighting choices, framing and film format; the image being “forced” unnaturally into a square or rectangular frame.

Flusser continues to write that by “playing” with the apparatus the photographer attempts to exhaust it’s possibilities and break free from the constraints of the program.

Photographs vs. Paintings

Conversely Flusser proposes that “traditional images” ie. Paintings or drawings; have a closer relationship with the world, as it was through the creation of images that humans first tried to explain the world around them. “Images are mediations between the world and human beings…the world is not immediately accessible to them and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible” (Flusser 1983 p.9). These images are a complex arrangement of visual symbols which need decoding. As we

scan our eyes across their surface relationships between these component symbols are formed as we extract the meaning. Flusser goes on to propose that images, themselves, become a barrier between us and the world as we inevitably idolise the image and cease to decode it's meaning. He suggests that texts were introduced as a way of reinterpreting images and that, in turn, these texts themselves began to be idolised. Photography, he proposes, developed as a method of trying to regain meaning from texts and to help us relate to our world. It, therefore follows logically, that, according to Flusser, photography is actually further removed from the world than the traditional image.

Abstraction vs. Realism

Abstraction dominated much of 20th century painting. Developing on from the reductionist view of realty found in early 20th century movements such as cubism, and post-revolutionary "constructivism"; abstract art is non-representational, non-figurative, with early practitioners like Kandinsky creating work with form and colour without reference to the real world. "Art unconcerned with the literal depiction of things from the real world" (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Instead exploring emotion, spirituality and the unconscious mind. This developed in the post war period into the more spontaneous abstract expressionism and "action painting" style of artists such as Jackson Pollack; who, reportedly, would slip into a trance-like state whilst painting.

In the 1960's a more representational realism in art began a resurgence, especially in the U.S., as a more analytical counter to abstraction began to gain favour.
The influential art critic and proponent of abstract expressionism, Clement Greenberg, in a lecture in 1968, suggested that abstract expressionism came to a sudden and long overdue end in 1962 and the avant garde of the 1960s eg. Minimalism, new realism and pop art (which took elements of both), became established in diametrical opposition to that which had preceded it in the 40s and 50s,

it was as if the cultural shift forced art out of it's self contemplation on it's own pure aesthetics and insisted it be used as a visual social commentary.

In the late 19th century Degas came to rely heavily on the use of photography as an aid to painting. He could incorporate the naturalistic poses found in many contemporary photographs, and began to use a "photographic" style of composition in his own imagery, ie. giving an impression of the cropping of a larger scene.

As if giving credence to Flusser's remarks on traditional images Bertolt Brecht remarked on 20th century realism; "Realism is not what real things are like, but what things are really like" (Stremmel 2006 p.9).

Visually closely related to photography, realist painting and it's various sub-genres aim to depict the world in a realistic way, although not necessarily by simple representation, and ranges from the work of Edward Hopper to the 1960's photo-realism and hyper-realism of Audrey Flack, Gerhard Richter and Richard Estes. This latter group often use photographic imagery which they project and then manually transfer the image to the canvas, elevating the status of a insignificant captured moment to a meticulously crafted painting. Their work explores the effect that photography has had in undermining the authority of the artist as a driving force behind contemporary visual culture.

Richard Estes, himself, disapproves of the term photo-realist as he uses the photographic image to create an" "ideal reality" which depicts comprehensible, ordered structures that have more to do with our reality than a mere clone of the visual image would do." (Stremmel 2006 p.46).

The technically "perfect" still lifes of Charles Bell play on the transitory nature of everyday objects, copying his own meticulous photographs to the relative archival permanence of oil on canvas; "my paintings look real but it's a subjective reality" he

states (Stremmel 2006 p.32).

It is the way in which the camera “sees” that is of interest to Chuck Close in his nine foot high closely cropped photo-realistic portraits of the late 1960’s. “The camera is objective. When it records a face it can’t make any hierarchical decisions about a nose being more important than a cheek. The camera is not aware of what it is looking at, it just gets it all down. I want to deal with the image it has recorded which is black and white, two dimensional and loaded with surface detail.” (Close, NPG).

In analysing the practice of these and other hyper-realist practitioners we can draw conclusions as to the characteristics of this particular realist genre;

- it tries to represent reality as a series of coded signs.
- It encourages us to regard reality as being more “fluid”; towards a created hyper-reality and simulacrum of Buadrillard.
- It draws us in and engages us as a visual puzzle. Challenging us to make sense of the visual clues, the viewer becoming integral to the work

Additionally, Edward Hopper’s images often portray scenes of mundane ordinariness but they ….”are not mere representations of supposed reality. They deconstruct and reconstruct the real, transforming it beyond the purely experiential.” (Renner 2002 p.85).

They are perceptive, heavily encoded visual metaphors. Reminiscent of a film still, plucked from a flow of continuous narrative and held within a single image. We scan for clues desperate to construct a meaning and feel frustrated by the inevitable ambiguity. Hoppers images are stylistically similar to those produced by many contemporary “staged / tableau” photographers.

As we saw earlier pictorial and documentary photographers have frequently “staged” images, directed a cast to perform for their camera in an attempt to give the image a

predetermined meaning often not publicising the fact they have constructed it. The photographers working within the current art genre of staged photography use the fact that they can create their own psychological, reflective space as an environment to challenge values and assumptions.

Computer generated imagery has resurrected photo-realism and the images which comprise this project are really examples of Flusser's "traditional images" created from the imagination to try and make sense of this world in terms of the virtual world. Although in their composition they use photography either directly for texturing geometry or referencing photographic tradition in composition. They are without a real world physical reference and portray thoughts and ideas rather than moments in time or actual locations. It is not my intention, except momentarily, to create a "trompe l'oeil" form of visual trickery, but the images are intended to represent personal visual markers that make us stop and consider our place in the world.

The images portray a less sensory more cerebral environment and are not visual representations of fact but are of thoughts and imagined experiences when the subject or viewer is reminded of their physical role and responsibilities. They do not seek to trick the viewer into believing them to be real but to emphasise the fluidity of our own experience of a personal reality as we increasingly participate in the online environment.

They are not in themselves indexical although the "reality" they contain and the reason they can confuse the real and the unreal comes form the fact that they contain visual clues and symbols that link them to the indexical properties of traditional photographic imagery (e.g. A car looks like an actual recognisable model and make of car so without the existence of that precise car the car in my image would not look real).

They depict a reality in a style belonging to a virtual reality. But how can a video game or some kind of online computer game be in any sense “a reality”?

What is Virtual Reality?

“A man in southern China appears to have died of exhaustion after a three-day internet gaming binge, state media said Monday. The 30-year-old man fainted at a cyber cafe in the city of Guangzhou Saturday afternoon after he had been playing games online for three days. Paramedics tried to revive him but failed and he was declared dead at the café”. (CNN 17th November 2007).

“Another tragedy from the virtual battlefields. During China's week-long National Day holiday last month, a young girl died after playing *World of Warcraft* for several consecutive days and her passing was acknowledged in an online funeral service by fellow *WoW* gamers.” (Joystiq.com 4th November 2005).

Up to 50 million people worldwide play MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) (Fox News 10th December 2007), and indeed there are more than 10 million “residents” of Second Life (3D virtual world imagined and created entirely by it’s residents) alone and these figures are increasing exponentially. Indeed Holly Stuart UK lead in 3Dinternet at IBM Research says that technical research company, Gartner estimates that by 2011 80% of internet users will be taking part in virtual worlds. (People Management magazine, April 2008).

What makes people behave like this? What is it about these environments that is so engaging or addictive? And can the experience, in any way, be a rewarding one?

Virtual reality has been defined as an “interactive, immersive experience generated by a computer” (Pimentel and Teixeira 1993 p.11).

Interactive; the user can intervene with the environment and the effect of which is seen in real time.

Immersion; "the experience of losing a sense of embodiment in the present whilst concentrating on a mediated environment" (Dovey and Kennedy 2006 p.146). ie. losing track of one's immediate surroundings.

There are many constructed interactive and immersive environments; museums and theme parks, for example; and we can be immersed in many forms of media and art and often interact on some emotional albeit passive level. Baudrillard writing in the 1980s and early 90s claims we are being deceived and societies' perception of reality is becoming eroded to such a degree that reality no longer exists, the media, especially, television being primarily responsible. This he calls "hyperreality" where we can no longer distinguish real from fake. Viewing pornography, for example, can influence the viewer to such an extent that he believes the pornographic view of sex is the "real" view. What we see unquestioning on the screen becomes our view of reality, we no longer have to experience it or struggle to assimilate our own opinions we can view our world as it is shown to us and accept it as the "truth". Susan Sontag's slightly more restrained "take" on this from her book "On Photography" was that our view of reality is complicated by the proliferation of images of it.

But we are not deceived into thinking computer environments *are* real as in lifelike, but many are tempted by the alternative experience they offer.

<u>Why are they addictive and why do they seem so "real" ?</u>

Real life is emotionally and financially precarious; as we grow and mature we build a career, possibly a family, acquire a certain status and material possessions, but one wrong decision can cause us to lose everything. Circumstances outside our control can send our lives into a disastrous downward spiral; we can lose our health, wealth

and family at any time. In the virtual world of the MMORPG there is no risk of such drastic failure. Characters in quest or task based games such as Everquest or Final Fantasy develop and grow as do those in the real world but without the danger that their "lives" will deteriorate. Experience, and therefore status, is quantifiably measured in "Experience Points" (xp's) and these cannot be lost be some random twist of fate. Work and time spent "in world" is never wasted as the character is constantly progressing. "MMORPG players commit themselves to their characters in such a determined way. Often living with their avatars every day for years, players can rest assured their hard work will not be undone by cruel circumstance." (R.V. Kelly 2004 p.30).

Other social worlds such as Second Life and Entropia Universe don't provide structured game play as such but create the infrastructure needed for the players themselves to create the narrative.

How do we interact socially in a virtual environment and what does it feel like?

If we take Second Life as an example, it currently accounts for about a fifth of the world's virtual population and comprises an area of 270 virtual square miles (10 times the area of Manhattan) (Meadows 2008, p24) and has a population of approximately 15 million a figure that is increasing by 600,000 a month (secondlife.com). The residents are a population of avatars; the on screen, online presence of the real life player. It is the avatar that extends the level of immersion to a far deeper level than say watching a movie or reading a book, where we can certainly identify with the characters but we can't actually *be* the characters.

In his essay "A Fragmentation Medium: The Digital Avatar", Adrian Sinclair describes his own avatar being examined by another in the online game "Final Fantasy XI". He

outlines how he could “feel” the actions of the other character even though his actual senses were of course limited to the sound and vision of the computer and he proposes a theory of how this could be so. He suggests that to some extent the user/player becomes disembodied where both digital and physical realities are inhabited simultaneously. This occurs as the “distance senses” of sight and hearing become heightened to such an extent at the expense of the “intimate senses” of taste, touch and smell, that they not only compensate but replace them giving the feeling of a constructed taste, touch and smell. The player is able, to a great extent, to have full sensory experience from the position of their avatar.

It has been conservatively estimated that there about 200 million people using avatars worldwide (possibly larger if we include all immersive online 2D environments) with around ten per cent of them spending more than nine hours per day as their avatar (Meadows 2008 p.94). There is evidence that this kind of hardcore user experiences not only a psychological feeling of incompleteness when away from the virtual environment but an inability to clearly distinguish their online possessions and roles from those of the real world. Meadows 2008 p.95).

The relationship a player has with their avatar is not straightforward, however, the environment creates needs and actions and as these are satisfied they build to create the avatar’s individual unique history and are some extent, therefore, independent of the controlling player. Many players have multiple avatars and can successfully operate each as if they possess completely different personality traits.

The fact that a player is anonymous is also vitally important. This, in effect, means that they have total freedom. Freedom to be who they want and to behave how they like, having no consequence to themselves of any action they take. Does this mean then that it is the true personality of the player that is manifest in their avatar free from restraint of social conventions?

In my opening paragraph I remarked that it is mainly men who seek the kind of escapism offered here and although socially driven worlds such as Second Life have a higher percentage of female residents (quot ref) this is still generally the case. The reason why online virtual worlds and computer games in general are traditionally male gendered spaces originates in a culture of almost unbelievable socially dysfunctional male stereotypes.

The entire computer hacker subculture has it's roots in MIT's model railway society. Past members of which included Bill Gates and Apple founders Steve Jobs and Stephen Wozniak. It was here that the term "hacker" was first coined as being someone who through the ingenious use of technology creates an efficient often inelegant solution to a problem (MIT TMRC website) and developed through the 1960s and 70s helped by MIT's access to early mainframe computer networks into the hacker of contemporary cyberculture as described in William Gibson's influential "Neuromancer" and Neal Stephenson's "Snow Crash"; someone who subscribes to the "hacker ethic" of "unlimited access to computers, all information should be free, mistrust authority, computers can change you life for the better and an be used to create art and things of beauty" (Levy, 1984 from MIT website). It was here in May 1962 that these early hackers devised and ran the first avatar based virtual reality (to a primitive degree, but insofar as having created a game playing environment) computer game "Spacewar!".

Ken Kutaragi, the leader of Sony's Playstation project, although inspirational was apparently a social inept loner (Dovey and Kennedy 2006 p.70); Carmack and Romero, the partnership behind the successful Doom and Quake series of MMORPGs, Sean Blackley of Microsoft's XBOX team, and many other key figures in early video game development were almost to a man highly intelligent avid game players from a very early age and often less than socially aware. This very male dominated culture naturally spawned very male orientated game narratives and

environments; created spaces where they would feel at ease, safe and unthreatened socially. Games are subsequently marketed to a male demographic completing the narrow gender profile.

How does how we engage with virtual reality differ from our relationship with film or a still image?

I think it is important to distinguish media types, to outline their individual characteristics and to try and work out their relationships with each other in order to clarify how we, the viewer, relates to each . For example; is photography's relationship to film equivalent to a cgi still image's relationship to a video game narrative? And if in some way they are comparable what is the still cgi image's relationship with a still photograph?

Photography

Christian Metz in his essay "Photography and Fetish" examines the differences between cinema and photography. Although produced using similar technology they are each viewed as being from a very different social context. Photography is often presumed to be portraying "real Life", usually private or family life, with the imagery produced being a visual aid to the memory of the photographer.

In his lecture "Well What is Photography" Urs Stahl attempted various definitions or characteristics expounding the basic "device to record light", which do provide an incite into how we relate to the photograph.
He suggests firstly that photographs are small segments abstracted from the world onto a two dimensional plane, seen from a similar, but not identical, viewpoint to our own. It reduces our world form being an encompassing environment utilizing all our senses to merely a small visual statement. We believe that we use photography to

understand and come closer to the world around us but in effect we are withdrawing from it.

Stahl describes photographs as being temporal; “fixed traces of light and shadow of a thing that was in front of the camera at a certain point in time”(Stahl 2003 p.7). As the shutter clicks the moment is locked in the past and the future is excluded.

From a semiotic standpoint photographs are only slightly coded images, leading to frequent misunderstandings. Consequently the photograph is usually found as part of a series.

And finally from a news media point of view, as photography is used to document the world and it’s events as seen and edited by media organisations our collective memory and history will be that solely of what we can see in the imagery produced.

Film

The indexical element present in both film and photography is treated very differently. We tend to see film as having an imaginary referent, often a fantasy element, and originating from an entertainment, story telling tradition where the inherent indexical quality is exploited by the narrative; Metz calls this “a realist guarantee for the unreal” (Metz 1990 p.3). Film by it’s nature equates more to the experience of real life; it has an unstoppable narrative, where imagery is driven along by a constant timeline and we are unable to recapture previous experiences. Film also engages the viewer from an auditory perspective; spoken dialogue, sound effects, background noise all help to convince us that what we experience is in some way real. We relate to and identify with the characters on the screen, we project our own selves into the narrative and into the onscreen environment, but we are ultimately passive observers. We do not view the work in the first person but instead see the characters through which we experience the narrative. The experimental film, “Lady in the Lake” (1947) Dir. Robert

Montgomery, uses the camera position to mimic the view point of the main character Philip Marlowe who we only see as a reflection in strategically placed mirrors. intended to engage the viewer by drawing him into the narrative this suggested “first person” style apparently had more of a distracting, disconcerting effect.

Video Games

The video game avatar, as outlined earlier, allows us to be both observer and participant, and in many cases especially in large scale social worlds such as “Second Life” enjoyment is obtained by merely experiencing social interaction as our avatar. In most cases we see the game from a “First Person Shooter” (FPS) point of view, i.e. the screen is viewed from either over the character’s shoulder or from his eye position, either way the player’s point of view is the same as the avatar’s.
The feeling of “presence” and immersion within the game comes from the knowledge that our actions as players have consequential actions through our avatars in the virtual space and these in turn drive the narrative; and a three dimensional world through which they can realistically navigate. This world should, like real life, not be wholly predictable.

CGI Still Images

Computer generated still images seem to either exist in high-end advertising imagery with the accompanying budget to create high quality, time consuming and labour intensive effects; or at the opposite end of the spectrum as computer screen grabs. There are exceptions; last year James Deavin had simultaneous exhibitions of Second Life created imagery both in the online world and at Jen Bekman’s New York gallery.
Generally it seems though that audiences and participants of online games or online content in general seem to consider it as almost valueless (Ruddock 2007), my work attempts to elevate the value of such imagery.

In practice though, categorising these media types in this manner can be misleading as categories overlap increasingly with changing styles and evolving technology. Photography in art has moved on from the “decisive moment” observational imagery of Cartier Bresson to a more considered narrative tableau style found in advertising and documentary photography as well as art.

Often called “Film Stills” (as in Cindy Sherman’s series from 1979 onwards) this genre focuses on a performance for the camera rather than simply photographing performance art and the imagery being built up with precise locations, props lighting gestures etc. often creating a kind of highly coded condensed fantasy scene, but in which some of the aspects of the real world are still recognisable. Many of these images display a wonderful ambiguity and tension as they explore and play with photography’s power to represent reality, and to incorporate narrative within a single image and as David Campany writes they can “set up a space from which to rethink social conventions and stereotypes” (Campany 2006 p.8).

Moving even closer to the cinematic is the work of Stephanie Schneider who combines series’ of staged Polaroid images with a soundtrack to create what are in effect movies of still images.

CGI images are used in movie making to add a sense of reality to the fantastical.

Conclusion

We produce images to help us make sense of the world we inhabit, our lives and the lives of those around us. Photography in particular is embraced as a documentary tool because of it’s direct physical link to our environment. We live in a world saturated with photographic imagery constantly consuming images, as Susan Sontag writes, “they are coveted as substitutes for first-hand experience, and have become

indispensable to the economy, to politics and in the pursuit of private happiness" (Sontag 1972 p.153). Advertising photography has always portrayed an idealistic reality but computer generated images often catch us unaware, blurring the boundary between the real and the constructed.

The advent of large scale online interactive and genuinely social virtual worlds has meant that we can now choose to experience an alternative temporary existence in an environment similar in many respects to our physical world but one with which we engage very differently, although the lines of distinction are often blurred.
Several countries, for example, have embassies in Second Life (Fig.5), Reuters has a full time news correspondent there and an increasing number of entrepreneurs have established business and made real world US dollars.

In attempting to investigate photographically how we engage with this phenomenon; not wanting either to simply photography individuals seated in front of computer screens or take screen shots of our online situations; then a new form of imagery must be employed to link the real and the virtual.
My work involves the creation of staged narrative simulated photographs seen from the familiar FPS viewpoint where we, the viewer, are the principal characters. They portray moments or thoughts when we are suddenly reminded of our roles and responsibilities in the real world, they allude to the possible guilt or at least the dilemma we face in trying to balance the real and virtual aspects of our lives. They are constructed using 3D computer modelling software rendering the geometry created with photographs in order to give the final image an almost photo-real appearance. It is the intention to create imagery that along with the lives of the players it represents sits on the border between the real and the virtual.
The scenes themselves contain elements that reinforce the fact that no matter how we would sometimes like to imagine to the contrary we are real physical people with

real physical and emotional needs. We do die when we don't eat, or when we get shot or fall from a tall building.

We do actually only have one life… but now we can choose how and where we spend it.

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