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51/2023

2023

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Rethinking The Proteus Effect – Can our digital personas influence our offline selves?

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Abstract. This paper seeks to clarify the notable phenomena known as *the Proteus effect*. This phenomena clarifies the ability of avatar characteristics within digital gaming environments to have a noticeable impact on people’s actions in the real world. The research question that informs the conceptual framework put forward in this academic discourse is the following: if the *Proteus effect* is clearly perceptible among members of online gaming communities, might it not possibly also apply to users of social networking platforms? The study will use an example from the science fiction anthology series “Black Mirror” to explain and support this theoretical claim. It is hypothesised that once people create a social media presence, they start creating a digital identity or “avatar”, the development of which has the potential to have a substantial impact on their behaviour in real life. The Proteus effect’s plausible expansion outside of the online gaming industry, where it was first documented, is the main hypothesis that this paper seeks to clarify through the use of a hypothetical scenario taken from modern cinematic narratives. This article’s hypothesis imagines a future in which people eventually become like their digital avatars, leading to a time when real people resemble their virtual counterparts.

Keywords. digital avatar; cyberculture; Black Mirror; Proteus Effect

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a life without digital technologies. Although we have no direct experience with the nature of that particular epoch, stories of a realm untethered from technology persist—a realm where navigation was unencumbered by the reliance on Google Maps and the validation of our offline efforts did not rely on the approval of our online community. Currently, a revolutionary shift is taking place, gradually blurring the distinctions between our online and physical existences. Crafting an online persona has proven to be a far easier process than customising our offline reality to our preferences.

However, this convenience hides a dangerous attraction to which we have all unconsciously surrendered. For many people, the gap between these two worlds has become insignificant as they move between locations without distinction, leading dual lives free of suspicion. The gadgets we use have become closely linked to our own existence. This fundamental transformation has resulted in a significant societal concern: impression management. The delicate interaction between real and virtual selves is crucial in our social and professional lives. Scholars have begun investigating the lingering impact of our interactions

on internet platforms on our subconscious after leaving the digital environment. It is increasingly clear that the interaction norms we use while creating and assuming avatars permeate our physical world [1].

What does a Greek god have to do with the effect of transformed self-representation on offline behaviour?

Proteus and its adaptive and needs-changing powers return to the story of increasingly powerful gamers. Greek mythology and contemporary reality have more in common than the name of the god who can take many forms. Is it possible for the superpower of the Greek god to be reborn in the form of VR and change the world as we know it? That is the question Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson [1] did not know they were answering when they started researching a vague effect unknown until then.

To understand the Proteus effect, it is necessary to define the *theory of behavioural confirmation*. This involves the process by which the expectations of one person (perceiving individual) cause another person (target) to behave in ways that confirm the expectations of the perceiving person [2]. This phenomenon is encountered both online and offline, but it is more related to the way the perceiving individual sees the behaviour of the target than to how the target itself behaves. In the case of research on the Proteus effect, this conceptual delimitation must be made so as not to confuse the role of the target with the role of the perceiver.

If in the theory of behavioural confirmation, the change of target is more related to the way the perceiver sees this, being directly correlated with the behaviour of the perceiving individual and not the target, in explaining the Proteus effect, researchers want to demonstrate the change in target behaviour and the characteristics of the chosen avatar. So, the expectations of the collectors do not influence the behaviour of the target. Research into the Proteus effect, in turn, focuses on how online chosen avatars shape users' behaviours without taking into account the recipient. Regardless of how others perceive the avatar, can it change the user's behaviour? When an attractive avatar is given, does a user become more friendly and sociable, no matter how others interact with him? The affirmative answer will be explained in this paper.

Another relevant theory that underlies the effect is the *theory of self-perception*, explained by Daryl J. Bem [3]. The author argues that people form their attitudes about themselves just as they build their attitudes about others – by observing outside behaviour. From this hypothesis it can be deduced that a person reaches self-knowledge through careful observation of behaviours and not through introspection. To support the relevance of self-perception theory, Yee and Bailenson provide examples from previous studies. An illustration they found is Valins' research [4], where participants were led to believe that their heartbeat increased as they viewed a person's photograph and came to think that the person in the photograph was much more attractive. In another study, participants who received black uniforms behaved more aggressively than participants who received white uniforms. The authors of the paper argued that wearing a black uniform drives behaviour in which subjects used to deduce their dispositions – “Just as observers see those in black uniforms as harsh, mean, aggressive, so do the person wearing this uniform” [5]. This effect was also later reproduced in a digital environment in which users who received dark-coloured avatars expressed a greater desire to engage in antisocial behaviour than users who received light-coloured clothing avatars [6]. The examples provided by researchers are again relevant to make an important distinction between the Proteus effect and the phenomenon of self-perception. If the phenomenon of self-perception was tested in a controlled environment, in reality, the Proteus phenomenon is based on the results of this research to experience the impact of the

online environment and the complex diversity that this new environment imposes on possible avatars and behaviours [1].

Last but not least, the phenomenon of *deindividuation* is extremely important to explain the Proteus effect. It refers to how the personal identity is lost, and the person is determined to behave abnormally for himself. This most often happens when a person is in a very large group or when there is a security of anonymity. The conditions of deindividuation are, according to Kiesler and colleagues [7], anonymity and lack of social feedback, but also the reduction of self-regulation.

Computer-mediated communication has evolved tremendously, moving easily from exchanging codes and texts to exchanging virtual signals through the avatars used. This brings back the feeling of little social feedback but also reduces anonymity and isolation. However, people who hide behind their avatars cannot be so easily identified, allowing virtual worlds to provide some degree of anonymity. In addition, social feedback, such as nonverbal and paralinguistic cues, is limited in scope in virtual worlds due to technological limitations.

It is important to note some of the behavioural challenges those social media users face. For example, Marder et al. [8] argue that “information on any social network is publicly disclosed, at least in the network of connected friends, with low levels of anonymity to multiple audiences simultaneously”. This leads to what the authors call *the chilling effect*. The chilling effect determines the management of impressions, i.e., “users will carefully manage their online avatar and avoid an unwanted image.” This effect comes with another phenomenon: *context collapse*, which results from the presence of different online audiences, as opposed to limited groups of people with whom a person normally engages in face-to-face interactions. Given these boundaries, people adjust their tone and presentation to the social context [9].

In their initial experiments, Yee and Bailenson show how the attractiveness and height of users’ chosen avatars have a significant impact on their interactions with real-world people. In the two experiments conducted in a controlled environment in 2007, they showed that users who were given more attractive and caring avatars talked more openly and approached the confederate with more confidence, while users with less attractive avatars did not have the same extrovert behaviour. Also, when they were asked to negotiate in real life, people with attractive avatars proved to be more confident than those with less attractive avatars. This confirmed the researchers’ hypothesis of conforming to the participants’ expectations regarding the degree of attractiveness and height of the chosen avatar. In 2009, Yee and Bailenson were joined by Nicolas Ducheneaut and studied the avatar users of the well-known *World of Warcraft* online game. Together they demonstrated that the way an avatar looks can influence a user’s behaviour in an online environment or community [10].

However, all these studies are limited by their formal nature. The fact that the results are manufactured “in the laboratory” leads to a lack of generalizing power and may affect the following research on this topic. Nevertheless, the benefits of virtual worlds can be translated to the real world. There is growing evidence that behaviours learned in virtual worlds can migrate off platforms. By discovering the Proteus effect, Yee and Bailenson demonstrate that people not only interact socially and meaningfully in the virtual environment, but can change their behaviour and interpersonal relationships, and the consequences of these changes can be transmitted to the offline world. The benefits of the effect can have many applications in reality: from psychological support to the reduction of social differences, racism and xenophobia [11].

If the effects inside virtual worlds are identifiable and can be measured more easily, then the same could be tried with the impact that the characteristics of an online avatar have on offline behaviours. For example, in a medical study, Virgil Wong [12] demonstrates how the

appearance of the online avatar as a person's best option can encourage him to follow instructions, diets and even sports programs to improve his real body. Through a "healthy selfie" application, a user is subjected to a 3D scan of his body at a given time, after which he can change his created avatar as he wishes. But the fun does not end here: once the user has chosen the desired weight, for example, he receives a diagram of the changes that will occur in his body during the special regime or program designed for him [12].

It seems that what now looks like science-fiction, will become a reality, as Kevin Kelly argues in his book on *The Inevitable*, when he mentions the benefits of technological developments and how they could help us to have a better life: "If AI can help humans become better chess players, it stands to reason that it can help us become better pilots, better doctors, better judges, better teachers" [13]. So, a future online avatar can greatly improve the actual condition that the user has.

Extending the Proteus Effect on social media

More or less dissatisfied with the real world, users isolate themselves in avatars and characters that they would have wanted from birth. The psychological processes underlying the Proteus effect explain why it is valid online. The effect occurs when a user's self-representation is significantly altered, often different from the physical self. The user then embodies the self-representation, behaves in this virtual form, and draws attention to his or her internal beliefs or attitudes based on these observations. After the embodiment appears, the user's behaviour then conforms to the modified self-representation, regardless of the actual physical self [1].

However, self-dissatisfaction is not the only reason to involve users in games. There is also an intrinsic pleasure in this. Jane McGonigal [14] explains this in her book, arguing for online games as tools that can be used to solve humanity's problems. The role of the game, according to her, is to make the world a better place. If our normal life is often full of work, fatigue and stress, games challenge us with what she calls "hard fun" – difficult but satisfying work. Games can improve our social connections and provide a huge arena for collaboration. McGonigal writes that games can fix what is wrong with the world on a small or large scale. A personal example she gives in an interview relates to the moments when she struggled to recover from a shock in her life and invented a game in which she assigned family members avatars with tasks to perform, such as coming to cheer her up or keeping her away from caffeine [15]. The games have helped her recover and she is convinced that they can help the whole of humanity to be better.

If we eliminate gender differences and technological complexities, all games share four defining features: a purpose, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation [14]. The *goal* is the specific outcome that the players are fighting for. They focus their attention and continuously direct their participation throughout the game to reach the desired goal. The goal is to motivate the players. The *rules* impose restrictions on how players can reach the goal. By eliminating or limiting the obvious ways to reach the goal, the rules push players to explore various ways to get where they want to go. The rules coordinate creativity and encourage strategic thinking. The *feedback system* tells the players how close they are to reaching the goal. It can take many forms, from a points system to the division of players or "missions" into levels, scores, or progress bars. Or, in its most basic form, the feedback system can be as simple as telling the player about an objective outcome: "The game will end when...". Real-time feedback serves as a promise to players that the goal is certainly achievable and provides motivation to continue training in the game. Finally, *voluntary participation* requires that everyone who enters the game knowingly and willingly accept the goal, the rules, and the feedback system. Knowing

these things lays the groundwork for a common ground for multiple players to socialize and unite their intellectual powers to reach a desired end. The freedom to enter or leave a game will ensure that “stressful and challenging intentional work” is experienced as a safe and enjoyable activity.

If we make a comparison between the world of games and social media, we can easily see that the online game is very similar to the social game we sign up for every time we access online social networking and communication platforms. Facebook, for example, is more than just a social network and can be metaphorically defined as a “gaming platform.”

Voluntary user participation is understood when they connect without being forced and have already formed the habit of being connected, 24 hours out of 24. We accept the game without reading the terms and conditions, and the platforms make our lives easier by continuous optimization of networks to have more user-friendly interfaces and easier access. The feedback system is also easy to spot. With only one click we show our appreciation for something our friends have posted, and with another click, we can see how much appreciation we have received for the new profile picture or how many comments our best friend has for the picture with the morning coffee. More recently, we are posting polls to find out which movie is worth watching, or getting involved in discussions that may take days to comment on intriguing “news”. We like to be appreciated and live constantly in the flow offered by social media. We do not even know how easily the minutes, hours and days go by when we are in a state of continuous satisfaction and instant feedback received online.

From the perspective proved in this article, the feedback system is the main cause of dependence on social media. Facebook and other such networks help users to find old friends and keep in touch with people who are far away. However, with the increasing popularity of these tools, there has been an increase in reports, both in the press and in the scientific literature [16] of users “addicted” to the virtual reality of social media, with a serious visible in their real life. Some reports show that the misuse of these social networks increases the isolation of users, paradoxically bringing additional damage to their social lives. However, the state of flow generated by social media, as in the case of games, is difficult to replace.

The rules of the online social world are simple: access the account and start building the avatar that will represent you or that you like. Add profile pictures, interests, descriptions, education, relationships and just about anything else you want to add. Last but not least, find your friends and build your social group. The goal, however, is debatable. It is not for nothing that the word “if you are not on Facebook, you do not exist” is well known. You enter this social game for various psychological reasons and continue to follow the rules so as not to be excluded. Like the purpose of games, the purpose of social media and the online environment, in general, is to give the user a sense of motivation, and of existence (a sense of purpose): “The games are the ones that give us something to do when there is nothing to do. (...) Games are signs for the future, and their serious cultivation is now perhaps our only salvation” [17].

Similar to online games, online life (and the social play it involves) greatly affects people’s behaviour in real life. Thus, the question “why do we choose life online?”. Everyone feels they have a place and a job. Constant feedback strengthens the constant involvement of users. The friendlier interface encourages understanding and adapting to the laws of VR society much easier than in reality. Simply put, I suggest that *virtual reality is the improved version of reality*. The place where no one judges you, where the inhibitions disappear, where you choose the avatar you want and where you build the life you would like to have in reality. Like the protagonist of *Ready Set Play*, the SF movie in which the future is lived in online games and

real life is too unimportant, the users of the artificial worlds create reputations that they could not get, for various reasons (financial, biological etc.).

Creating an avatar on social media facilitates the creation of a gap between the online image (as self-representation) and offline identity (as self-substance). Presenting one version of oneself in offline life and another version via social media leads to a lack of user integrity. From the perspective of Brunskill [18], the social avatar (and the gap it represents) also contributes to the user's unhealthy emotional states. The example given in his research refers to the comparisons of users with over-designed lifestyles by others, which leads to an unsatisfactory sense of self-dissatisfaction: "It seems that as humanity accelerates and shrinks to become increasingly obsessed with self-image, self-promotion will transcend self-awareness as profound psychological effects appear over time" [18].

All these consequences lead to the need to define the need for self-presentation in the online environment. In this regard, I found it necessary to illustrate Zizi Papacharissi's study of the self-presentation of people online. It emphasizes the importance of web page designers who can guide users in a certain direction of creating their avatars and online identity through the various things they can share on social media as long as the platform allows. From studying Web pages at the time, Papacharissi notes that individuals use a variety of design tools to introduce themselves, attract visitors, and solicit feedback through online platforms. The design elements are combined to stage an online performance through which users reveal their personality with the help of the avatar used. Web designers use both written discourse and indirect expressive elements, including hyperlinks, images, animations, colours, and fonts to build their identity [19].

The Proteus effect seen from the perspective of social media, and not from the perspective of online games, can be limited by the platforms that users choose. Creating the avatar and implicitly transposing a narrative identity into virtual reality has the effect of changing the real-world behaviours of users. If on LinkedIn, as the researcher van Dijck [20] shows, users create "more serious" avatars, on Facebook or Instagram the exposed avatar focuses on other strengths of the user. However, if a user creates an avatar with various appreciations of film culture, for example, regardless of the social media platform they choose, they may be influenced to watch more movies and read more about this area in reality.

Thus, if the Proteus effect can be extended beyond the gaming world (on online social platforms), then an illustration would better capture the essence and consequences of the phenomenon. In this sense, the purpose of the research is to present a situation in the field of SF cinema to explain how an avatar can affect the user's life outside the platforms used.

In order to better present the cybercultural hypothesis, I will further observe the transposition of the Proteus effect in the *Nosedive* episode of the *Black Mirror* series, by choosing the scientific method used to be the case study presented by correlating the phenomena underlying the effect with certain scenes in the episode. Certainly, the effect of the online avatar on offline life is an idea that we cannot ignore in today's society. Based on this concept, contemporary cinema has created various utopian and dystopian scenarios to emphasize the need to be aware of the effects that technology has on the human brain and on life in general.

***Nosedive* – falling into dystopia**

Nosedive, the first episode of season 3, definitely reminds us that social media has invaded and changed our normal lives. This episode is a revealing one to observe how dangerous and unreal a society can be controlled by the feedback of others, dominated by the presented image and not the real one. The action is set in a perfect world where everything is in

place, perfectly nuanced in pastel colours (including clothes, houses and furniture). Everything is pleasant and idyllic in this not-so-distant future. However, the very dark world of social media is hidden behind apparent perfection.

The story of the episode *Nosedive* is centred around Lacie (personified by Bryce Dallas Howard) and how she advances in this perfect society, where people are noted in an application very similar to Instagram. The main difference is that ratings are actually social scores. They go beyond the social network and determine the lives of the characters in the real world.

In the application presented, the lowest score is 0, and the highest score is 5. The place of the characters in society is determined by how others evaluate them in this application. The evaluation is made following any social contact but also based on the photos posted. If the evaluation of the protagonists is high enough, they can get a better job, buy a nicer house and have access to many other benefits. Social relationships are based on mutual compliments, but most of the time, people are not honest about the opinions they express. Lacie is one of those people who was trapped in this system and agreed to live her life according to an absurd set of rules. For example, when the qualifications she receives are low, Lacie cannot rent the car she wants, cannot live in the neighbourhood she wants, loses her priority for a seat on the plane, ends up being avoided by others, and is not eligible to be the bridesmaid at the wedding of her best childhood friend.

Although Lacie is a popular young woman who has a good job, she does not have an elitist score, although she is characterized by a high score – 4.2. However, her life could be much better if she had a higher score. At least that is what she thinks, and she is trying her best to score more points. Thus, exemplifying the tendency to present through the used avatar an idealized version of the real personality, Lacie is able to do anything to advance and reach the elite. The first step is to move to a new neighbourhood, more beautiful and elegant, perfect for a person who presents himself in such a way on online platforms. The neighbourhood where Lacie wants to move is not a place she can afford or that characterizes her. She is seen completely differently by her brother, who knows her and does not understand the change in her behaviour caused by the Proteus effect, nor the irrational decisions that Lacie makes. The fact that the protagonist pays the first instalment for “a prison cell with fake smiles” worries her brother, who tries to remind her of her true nature. This only makes Lacie even angrier, and from this quarrel, everything starts to fall apart.

To take credit for her dream home, she visits an image consultant who reminds her of her role as a high-scoring social circle to advance her status. To accomplish his goal, Lacie tries to get the attention of an old childhood friend, Naomi. Naomi is a beautiful young woman with a perfect life who is about to get married. She is one of the elites, as are all her friends. Lacie is convinced that if she can get great appreciation from Naomi and all her friends, she will have the life she wants.

Naomi asks Lacie to be her bridesmaid at her wedding. Lacie accepts without hesitation, despite her brother’s warnings. He reminds her of some painful things Naomi has done to her in the past, but Lacie thinks she needs to go to that wedding because she will be full of people with very high social qualifications. If he gets better points, he can reach a rating of 4.5 and can finance his dream apartment, leading to the perfect life he imagines. Ryan, again, disagrees with her decisions, reminding her that Naomi was not her best friend during high school and that he only wants her at the wedding to create empathy and score even more. All of Naomi’s decisions, from the decision to move to a quaint neighbourhood, to the strange culinary choices, illustrate the effect that the idealized avatar built on online platforms has on people’s offline lives. Even though the episode is a sci-fi one, the reality it presents does not seem so imaginary.

This extreme concern for our image and what we want to project about ourselves is an extremely realistic reflection of contemporary life. *Nosedive* certainly reminds us of the situations we experienced when we chose to post the most successful pictures when we shared information that would show how interesting or funny we are, or when we befriended people whom we do not really know, just because they have an aura of influencer in our group of friends. Of course, we all have people in our online network in mind when we want to post something. We are thinking about who will see our posts and what they will believe.

As things are not going well for Lacie, she starts to show some negative attitudes and immediately the scores start to drop. The social pressure of this extreme application, accompanied by the wedding invitation, makes Lacie even more obsessed with her own popularity. A series of unforeseen events, starting with the quarrel with her own brother, not interested in these qualifications and satisfied with her average condition, make Lacie drop in the qualifiers and go through a whole emotional carousel until the wedding she has to reach. Because the protagonist drops in rating, Naomi, worried about what a mediocre percentage will look like at her senior wedding, cancels the invitation and asks Lacie not to come again. Still obsessed with status, Lacie believes she can resolve the situation and continues on her way. The events and encounters on her adventurous journey make the protagonist herself and finally take off her mask. Lacie becomes human again. It is human to have selfish feelings and not feel what everyone else is feeling. People express anger, frustration, sadness. But in the perfect world where Lacie lives, people do not show emotion. Her nervous breakdown is not just a release. Although she ends up in prison because she ruined the perfect wedding, she finally feels free.

Prison walls do not oppress it, society does. Once she is forced to put society aside, she can finally scream and drive away all her frustrations. Finally, it can be natural, without constraints. In the final scene, Lacie “lost her mind” and her cell phone, but paradoxically regained her freedom in prison. Black Mirror reminds us of the hidden ugliness of society. It makes us face the truths that we often ignore. In this case, the “black mirror” becomes, in general, a metaphor for the negative aspects of allowing excessive access to technology in our lives. This whole system of mutual evaluation makes Lacie no longer aware of her own feelings and desires, and the frustration of not being like those she admires seems to be stronger than the desire to be herself. The episode presents a nightmare based on aggressive merriment, while individuals try to pretend to be good and give themselves assessments so as not to feel excluded, not to feel despised or categorized as “second-class citizens” [21].

Discussions: How can the Proteus effect influence humanity?

The effect that the online avatar has on the offline life of the characters in this episode is visible. The obsession with the most beautiful image in a life lived absolutely in the online environment affects not only the offline lifestyle but also the mental health of the participants. The Proteus effect here shows the negative side of a double life: imitating perfection in a naturally imperfect society. The utopian vision desired by this social system rather creates a false world, in which only artificial happiness is appreciated. One example that illustrates this idea is the case of Instagram and the people who follow an account. The most popular accounts are full of counterfeit happiness and manufactured beauty. Although one uses an infinite number of filters on their photo and carefully chooses everything one publishes, one cannot please everyone.

Analysing the episode according to the theories underlying the research, it can be seen that the character goes through the same behavioural transformations specific to the phenomenon. Lacie feels the effect of behavioural confirmation when she posts a perfect picture

online (with the coffee and cake she bites from without enjoying it) and immediately increases her number of appreciations and social score, so the others behave according to her expectations about the success of photography. This is how we act when we search for “Instagrammable” places and when we imagine how many likes and comments a picture will have, even before we capture it.

Lacie’s facial gestures make it clear that she does not enjoy her coffee or smiling cookies, but she photographs her half-bitten cookie sitting next to her coffee cup and posts it on social media, typing: “It tastes like heaven”. However, once she sees how much appreciation she receives, the protagonist exudes the joy of a man who drank the best coffee in the world.

The diversity brought by online platforms in self-personalization also leads to the construction of an idealized variant of real personalities. The phenomenon of self-perception, tested in controlled environments and described in the above research, is also present in the episode. Observing her behaviour, Lacie engages in activities that would lead to a better position in society: she goes to cafes for people of higher rank, she wants to move to a select neighbourhood, and she befriends people with better scores, to receive advantageous points in turn. Looking at the people around us, through Lacie’s eyes, equipped with smart lenses, we realize that we are dealing with a society in which the effect of self-perception and behavioural confirmation theory works according to the ideas analysed.

Lacie’s ardent desire for a higher rating causes her to seek the approval of the distinguished guests of the glorious wedding to which she is invited and to take absurd steps to reach the image accepted by society in the series. The protagonist tries to show signs of belonging to the elite class on social media. These signs have nothing to do with Lacie’s reality of her affiliation and character. In a virtual defeat of the real, Lacie and most of the characters appear as live extensions of their most pleasant avatars, recorded on social platforms [22].

Likewise, the phenomenon of deindividuation at the base of the Proteus effect occurs during the episode. Lacie ends up getting lost in the fight to become more popular, being unrecognizable by her own brother (who doesn’t agree with this system anyway). Unlike Lacie, characters who break away from the rating system, such as Ryan, Lacie’s brother, deny the happiness and success promised by the high score.

Ryan’s digital relationship with his video game friends, although not seen during the episode, seems to be one of the most authentic connections made with a healthy five-star involvement. He doubts the subjective well-being of the elites. Lacie sells herself not only as a flatterer but also as a wannabe influencer. She imagines that she will reach a high social status and does not accept any action that would decay her, always believing that things will be fixed, until the nervous breakdown in the last part of the episode.

The need to be surrounded by the elite in both his inner and outer circles causes him even more insecurity, knowing that if he were himself, he would not only be insignificant from a social point of view but also useless from a point of view. financial. Lacie’s self-hatred causes her to betray her values and even her low-scoring friends. She ends up behaving abnormally and making irrational decisions precisely because she is in an environment conducive to the loss of her identity. Although the conditions of deindividuation described by Kiesler [7] (anonymity and lack of social feedback) are not the causes of this phenomenon here, Lacie ends up losing her values and turning into a nightmare person.

Therefore, the image he presented on the artificial platforms came to control the character’s behaviour in life outside the platforms. This case is exemplary in demonstrating the Proteus effect. The avatar built through dishonest appearances and behaviours, along with a way to classify the characters, led to the change of the person to madness. Today, we classify

people in obvious ways (exam scores, Uber drivers' ratings, or restaurants that deliver our food), but also subtle ones (we judge someone's appearance or intelligence for no real reason, based on prejudice). We do not realize the impact of our personal judgments and evaluations until we see it in a ubiquitous system like the one presented in *Nosedive*.

The presence of judging systems is growing, and the pressure to keep up with our colleagues is already incredibly high. A few years ago, we bragged about our contact list on Yahoo Messenger, and now teens brag about the number of views on platforms like TikTok or Snapchat. And then, but even now, people are trying to integrate and advance as much as possible on the social ladder built in the online environment, but do not realize how big the impact of the avatar is on our behaviours and decisions.

If we advance the theory that the Proteus effect can be extended from gaming to online social platforms, then this episode is representative showing how the purpose, rules, feedback system and voluntary participation of such a network can affect the offline life of people. Based on social scores, superficiality and false smiles, the system in which the protagonist is registered changes her opinion about herself and turns her into an unrecognizable person, who gives in mentally at the end, when she sees that she cannot reach the imagined perfect, no matter how much would change. Of course, the extension of this example is limited, because the episode is included in the SF section and cannot be considered as illustrative for the society in which we live. However, what exactly can be seen in this episode is how constant surveillance through self-exposure on social networks and constant feedback can affect the human psyche. What if we took everything, we see on Instagram seriously? What if we started ranking people by their popularity on a social network?

The answer to these questions can already be understood in a specific case in China, where a similar system has come to life. China takes the idea of a social score to the extreme, using big data to track and classify what citizens do – their shopping, their passions and their mistakes. Hvistendahl Mara [23] investigated this phenomenon for Wired magazine, 3 years ago. China's social credit system extends the idea to all aspects of life, judging the behaviour and trust of citizens. If a citizen has been caught crossing illegally or has not paid a court bill on time or has even listened to too much music on the train, he or she may lose certain rights, such as booking a plane or train ticket.

The Chinese experiment can become a reality as soon as possible, and the consequences of our actions both online and offline will be felt in the style of the *Nosedive* episode. The avatar we build daily through online interactions, posting, sharing, commenting, and creating and maintaining an online social circle will affect how we behave later in reality. The effects observed by Yee and Bailenson in online games can also derive from the consequences of the avatars in our social games that we participate in every time we connect online.

Conclusion

This paper metaphorically analyses the transposition of the effect in a different environment, trying a unique approach to a cybercultural idea. In order to continue to better explain the effect that our online representation has on our offline life, we considered it necessary to analyse the transposition of the effect in contemporary cinematic discourse. The SF scenarios in the hit series *Black Mirror* have put into action a reality not far away in which the social scores received in the online environment control the development possibilities of people in reality. In this sense, the presentation of the protagonist in an environment controlled by the activity of her avatar ideally reveals the metaphor discussed. I have described how the

phenomena underlying the Proteus effect are also present in the lives of the characters presented and how this perfectly illustrates the extension of the effect beyond the games.

Now, more than ever, we must pay attention to the integrity of our psyche. We cannot ignore the effects of the Internet on the human brain, even though research on this subject is still in its infancy. The avatar we are working hard on to reach the best version, which we would like to have in reality, has consequences in real life that we cannot even notice. The advice of theorists in the field unanimously supports the delimitation of online life from the real one, but this is less and less taken into account by the generations born with technology at heart. A future in which the façade we show to the online world can control our offline life, as it did to the *Nosedive* world, does not seem so distant, especially now, as we move forward with unimaginable speed toward progress.

The idea of social cooperation through mutual feedback to create a better world sounds great. After all, if you do not do anything wrong and follow the rules, you have nothing to lose, right? Well, the cinematic example proves otherwise. One mistake and your life can change dramatically. The superficiality with which humanity would have been treated in such conditions calls into question the freedom of human choice. In addition, how do we know that we are judging the people around us correctly? Gladwell [24] argues that “the people we judge ‘correctly’ are the individuals who correspond — those whose level of sincerity coincides by chance with the way they look.” It analyses the behaviour we have towards strangers and the superficiality with which we treat the people around us, not really paying attention to the relevant characteristics. People’s innocence is expressed differently for each individual, and the discrepancies that may arise between our expectations of a reaction and human unpredictability are phenomena that we do not take into account when providing feedback. That is why the episode turned from a utopian dream into a horror scenario.

It remains to be seen how the participants in this social experiment will be affected in China. Is transformation in our avatars an inevitable thing?

Limits of the study

What are the limits of extending the avatar on social media? Depending on the specifics of the game, the avatar used for this purpose has a rather utilitarian and not a presentation function, while on social media, the used avatar has the main function of exposing a real or imaginary identity.

Thus, the main limitation of extending the avatar on social media is the way in which personalization is possible. In addition to the specific differences in the environment in which an avatar is created, users also take into account the possibility of verifying the identity displayed online, outside the network. Thus, a player can adopt an avatar of the opposite sex, with improved physical characteristics and exaggerated qualities, while a social media user is limited in presenting himself by the personalization model of his avatar on the network he uses.

Another limitation is related to the specifics of social media and takes into account how other participants can influence the avatar created by a user. An example of this is the ability to tag friends in photos on Facebook or Instagram (now transferred to artificial intelligence that has the function of recognizing faces on certain platforms and can automatically tag the avatar). Thus, even if we want to present an image of a hard-working student, for example, his portrait may be labelled as a less serious activity. Thus, personalization of the avatar by other users involves expanding the possibilities of developing its influence on consumer behaviour. On the other hand, players have the opportunity to comment (give reviews) on the avatar of other players on their own social networks (steam). This aspect, however, has less remarkable effects on the evolution of a player.

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