

## How WE Create I

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Hi. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to speak with you today. First I'd like to thank David Urban, Alex Lightman and everyone at H+ for getting us all in the same room. Today I want to explore the question: How do WE create I?

I've been interested in this topic for quite some time.

- I first noticed that not many people pay attention to pro-actively creating an identity; although more and more of it is happening under the guise of a personal brand.
- Besides this, not much thought is given to how structures encourage certain identities and behaviors. An environment – virtual, online or meat-space has a certain set of rules for behavior.
- And finally, my most recent interest has been through my exploration of creating my own brand: heathervescent.

Others have explored this idea

- We are all probably familiar with Marshall McLuhan's famous quote: The Medium is the Message or Massage. Wherein he suggests the way in which the message is communicated affects the message, hence the media massaging the message.
- More recently this idea was partially explored by Jaron Lanier, in his new book, You are not a Gadget. Lanier explores this with a musical concept, and the limitations MIDI technology put on music creation.
- One of my favorite authors, Douglas Hofstadter, author of the tome: GED, Godel Escher Bach, explores the identity concept in his more recent book, I am a Strange Loop. He explores a scenario where you create copies of your friends, loved ones, anyone that you interact with in your mind. You create a library of replicants of your best friends, enemies and loved ones, up here.
- And just last week there was a series of articles in the NY Times on the impact of multi-tasking and fragmented attention on the brain. Research is showing high exposure to multitasking changes your brain's ability.

The Medium is changing us.

I like to think about this question around the way we experience, create and respond to technology. And I love to explore the value sets encoded in the structure of our systems. Of course, I start from a specific perspective: so I must ask myself what that is – who am I?

Who are you? It's a simple fallacy that I am always the same person. (*I'm not.*)

This is rarely true. We have facets of our identity that we bring out in appropriate times. I am not the same person at work, with my family, performing on stage or talking to you here now. I experience my identities fluidly, in a present moment. These facets of my identity are linked, or anchored, by my physical form.

Online, it's much easier to allow these identities to grow and expand without the limitation of being associated with the other (sometimes conflicting) identities.

Our Fragmented Identities have exploded online.

- Anonymity is one key characteristic that has encouraged this. I'm not going to go into the pros and cons of anonymity. However it is a defining characteristic – one of the metavalues in the (internet) system. (The freedom to choose to be anonymous or not.)
- Pennames and Pseudonyms are not new concepts. Using them gives the bearer a sense of freedom. The Cacophony Society, pranksters and influences of early Burning Man believe in using pseudoms. These fake identities give the revelers the freedom to act beyond the traditional and accepted roles in society. They become tricksters, protected fools.
- Sometimes these identities take on a life of their own. They become bigger than the person who wears it.
- Success = stagnation for the rockstar who is limited to play their pop hits as they own interests and skills evolve.
- It's as if their identity has been pigeon-holed into what the mainstream success defined them by. George Michael of Wham writes about this in one of his songs and he shocked the music industry with his explicitly sexual songs after Wham's commercial success.
- And I've already mentioned Hoftstaer's Strange Loops. You never have a second chance to make a first impression. Your off day may give the impression you're a jerk, when that's not necessarily the truth.

Going beyond our self: Mental Mindsets

We extend our identities in many ways.

Through Brands, cars, devices, objects. We identify with groups, institutions, communities, movements, ideas. And Music, which can set a specific mental state.

- As I mentioned, we have multiple identities and some may choose to segment them, others choose to be open and integrated, and others still choose anonymity to maintain privacy.
- We explore roles with role playing. This is not new. DnD, Acting and Theatre have done this to a certain degree. (Shakespeare's famous, all the world's a stage quote).
- Technology gives a more immersive and highly visually creative area in which to create and express an identity.
- Physical and beauty modification change our identity – for both external and internal reasons.
- And drugs are used to enhance ourselves from this cup of coffee to Adderall and Modafinil (Provigil).

- The arena of experiments is not limited to the clinical. As the topic of this conference – the Citizen Scientist – you can participate in the experiment yourself. With all these options – we have opened the doors of expression.

### The Doors of Expression

Citizens of Second Life are not limited to the biology of the meat-world. In gaming worlds like Spore, WoW, Grand Theft Auto, and Red Dead Redemption, you create a character and go off on adventures. You can try on a costume closer to him with blogs, twitter and MySpace, each systems that encourage self expression. The pseudonym can shield one when exploring sensitive or off-limit topics. Some of these pseudonyms developed into personal brands. And some the personal brands are created in response, or in conjunction with an audience.

Contrast this with FB, who wants to connect to your “real” identity, which limits the way some people can use it.

And then there’s ID theft. Wherein someone borrows or steals from a real-life person, co-oped parts of the identity/personality for themselves. (See movie Single White Female.) The Pirates of the Caribbean Capt. Jack is somewhat based on a real life person – and it’s not Mic Jagger. It’s an unruly tattoo artist in Rio de Janeiro: Jonathan Shaw.

Here’s an image from second life where architects discuss building the architecture of SF. It’s immersive, Visual, Very Stimulating. (And it’s a strange loop!)

### Do we get lost? (*I have.*)

People become enamored by your Avatar-self: Embodiment = Immersion. So much that you’d rather be that person. I’ve gotten caught in the streams of influences, a reinforcing feedback loop that supports specific mindsets, ideals and behaviors. Then there’s the audience effect. Has anyone had the experience of becoming someone else when the cameras were turned on? My race team was once filmed for a Reality TV pilot and our behavior changed when the cameras were on.

What is your motivation for participation? How do you actions impact others’ identities? Why are you participating? And what happens to privacy on those who wish to be private?

Do we end up valuing the values the system values? (sensationalism, immediacy, efficiency, response, power, youth, beauty) Do we end up valuing identities that are valued or can only be created within the system?

I’m concerned with the Me Generation (lost in their own reflection) and they are not interested in anything that isn’t directly related to their individual self.

### Ownership of our Soul

When we’ve expanded ourselves using these other ways/products, who owns it? A lot of social media is built off the joint identification. Authentic Viral Marketing, User Evangelists. But when

that happens, does a brand control the brand? I am me and I have some control over how I am projected. But I don't have control over your perception or me or your memories.

When we identify with something externally and that changes in a way we no longer identify with, do we feel betrayed? Obama?

The truth is easier to know with today's technology. Blogging, life-streaming, twitter and flickr capture our real time experiences and emotional states – if we were to go back and review them. We create this history collectively, many people documenting the “same” event from their perspective.

Physically we can learn more than ever about ourselves → genetically and beyond. I love my Zeo, which allows me to observe and monitor my sleep cycles and experiment with the impact my activities and behavior have on it.

The point is Identity is not something you create in a vacuum. It evolves and changes in response to changing environments. The medium is the message can be the distraction. And if you are a creator of the system, the technology, or an environment – YOU may create WE.

As we move towards a closer bond with technology, I encourage everyone, especially creators of the technology, to ponder for a moment **what values are being encoded in what you create?** How may these values impact the way people use your product? The way people define themselves? And how are your interactions with these technologies defining others, as well as yourself?

I'd like to leave you with Alice's response to the Cheshire Cat.

*I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.*

*- Lewis Carroll*

And this is ok.

Thank You!

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