

Digital life logging

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When I told my 11 year-old son that there were over six billion people populating Planet Earth he replied: "Is that all?" According to worldometers.info, the figure is hurtling towards 7 billion at a rate of around 50 000 a day (net estimate). Projections tell us it will reach this milestone by 2012. Only last year (Saturday, February 25, at 7:16 p.m. Eastern Standard Time) it hit the 6.5 billion mark.

Just under a thousandth of these souls have chosen to take up residence in another world. The population of Second Life, an Internet-based virtual world, stands at 6 million, about twice the world population a thousand years ago. It has doubled since January this year. According to a dotcom blog called secondliferesearch it will have 25 million registered users by March 2008, although there is duplication since some Residents have more than one account.

The appeal of Second Life (and other similar software-enabled virtual worlds) is obvious. Second Life allows you to grow wings, an outsize penis and a healthy bank balance of Linden dollars, used to trade goods and services. In real life you may be a penniless pimply nobody. In Second Life you can be Calico Fran, an amazonian scantily-clad redhead who hobnobs with Alienhearts, a DJ with brilliant green eyes, the ears of a cat and a live stoat draped around his neck. Your avatar (a Sanskrit word meaning the incarnation of a deity) is responsible for playing out your fantastic life.

On the opposite end of technology-enabled possibilities is another form of cultural narcissism: lifelogging.

For the past seven years, in an experiment called MyLifeBits, Gordon Bell has documented every aspect of his work life. Bell records and archives every keystroke on his computer, every email, every conversation, every photo he takes, every movie he watches, every web site visit, every window on his computer and how long it remained after – any and all data he can record he does.

A more extreme form of lifelogging, which tech writer Kevin Kelly calls radical self-surveillance, includes nano-sensors to record an individual's vitals and hundreds of microscopic cameras that record all visual stimuli like digital eyes.

No avatars here. The minutiae of your life are laid bare: constant and microscopic monitoring of vital measurements and a searchable, retrievable and shareable memory of people you meet, events you attend and places you have been.

Kelly maintains that lifelogging could someday become ubiquitous, once the obvious hurdles of memory loss due to digital crashes and obsolete software are overcome. Lifelogs are also difficult to organise, eventually becoming almost unsearchable because of the huge volume of information they contain.

Computer scientist David Gelertner envisages an information stream, rather than the hierarchical "windows" model of files and folders, as a more effective means of archiving a lifelog. Here the future flows into the present into the past and one stream merges into another. Recalling a memory is more organic and natural: the smell of lavender might trigger memories of your grandmother and retrieve her recipe for chocolate cake.

Kelly deduces that once the lifelog prevails, humanity will be faced with some interesting legal and cultural conundrums. Some of these, notably the issues of privacy and copyright, have already surfaced because of the footprints we leave all over the internet each time we visit. He asks for instance: "What part of your life is someone else's privacy?" and "Can the government subpoena your lifelog?"

For most of us, the memory we have already is quite enough. We can still choose to bury the ones we don't like. And what will happen to forgive and forget?