

VIRTUAL WRITING AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY

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NEO: I have these memories from my life. None of them happened.

What does that mean?

TRINITY: That the Matrix cannot tell you who you are.

--- *The Matrix*

Within *The Matrix*, Larry and Andy Wachowski's cyberspace epic is a brooding meditation on postmodern identity. In the dialogue referenced above, Neo, the film's befuddled protagonist, is experiencing a severe paradigm shift. The world he thought he knew no longer exists. Everything he has lived up to that moment is merely the product of a computer-generated dreamworld implanted in his brain –the Matrix from which the film derives its title. The newly unplugged Neo realizes he was living a simulated existence designed to keep him oblivious to the real world, which is being run by intelligent machines. Another way of putting all this simply: our hero Neo is experiencing an identity crisis.

At least that's how I teach the film in my first-year composition classes at UCLA Writing Programs. As part of a quarter-long examination of the human mind, memory, and artificial intelligence, I introduce students to the film's depiction of the powers and possibilities of virtual reality. The film works particularly well alongside readings that explore the impact of

technology on identity and human relations. But before we get to dissect *The Matrix*, students already have experienced some of what Neo undergoes, at least in a controlled and limited fashion. Like the character Neo, who shifts from respectable software program writer to underground rebel hacker, my students get to change their identities. While Neo achieves these transformations through downloading of programs into his brain, my students perform their identities through “virtual writing.” With the click of a computer key, they assume a virtual persona of their choosing. With another click, they return to reality. Another key difference between Neo's experience and that of my students: Neo's virtual identities were programmed by the machines that run the Matrix while my students create their own alternate personas and control their destinies.

The Matrix demonstrates the flexibility of identity as the film's protagonist morphs into different personas through his virtual experiences. The vehicles for doing so are software programs, the very devices that Neo creates as an employee of a high-tech corporation. He is, in fact, a software program writer. Even though the sort of writing in which Neo engages is technically very different from the writing produced by students in my composition classes, in both scenarios personal transformation is facilitated, indeed made possible, by the transmission of information through text. In an essay titled “Composition as Experience,” Nathan Crick offers his view of writing as “a constitutive and ongoing practice whose purpose is not to transmit static ideas and language but to transform our lived experience in time” (259-260). For many of my English 3 students, their adventures with virtual writing proved to be such a transformative experience. At the same time that the virtual reality project made them palpably conscious of writing as a vehicle for constructing and performing identity, their participation in virtual writing gave students a greater sense of the possibilities for revelation and transformation that occur through language.

This outcome supersedes what I intended for the exercise. On a very practical level, the role-playing assignment allows

students to experience the impact of virtual reality firsthand so they can articulate their positions in an argumentative essay. As part of preparation for the essay, they read articles about cyberspace interactions by scholars such as Sherry Turkle and Clifford Stoll. The virtual exercise allows them to enter into the academic conversation about the impact of technology on identity and relationships as they consider the clashing perspectives of Turkle, who embraces the possibilities of virtual role-playing, and Stoll, who believes such Internet excursions lead to declining social involvement. In addition to the experiential dimension of the exercise, my objective is twofold: to allow students to gain critical consciousness about their use of technology and to deepen their awareness of how their writing changes in response to a different genre and audience. The assignment is in many respects a contemporary twist on the long-established composition exercise of allowing students to play with voice. The use of the computer lends a postmodern dimension to the ancient practice of rhetorical posturing — a skill that prepares students to communicate in a range of diverse academic, social, and professional communities. In an essay titled “Liberal Education, Writing, and the Dialogic Self,” Don H. Bialostosky advocates a Bakhtinian approach to composition that allows students to experience an interplay of voices and to practice communicating in a range of “alien languages,” including academic discourse. I agree with him that students can gain from acquiring “the power produced by switching genres and defying conventions” (16).

He adds, “Though we would not want to train students in inappropriate genres and behaviors that would hinder their success in history or biology or even other English classes, we are free to engage them in intellectual struggles from which they learn to hold their own and choose their own genres, not just to behave themselves” (16). In his view, allowing students to play with genre and voice offers them “new resources for seeing and saying” (17). In my class, the virtual writing assignment, which is integrated into the larger academically oriented assignment on argumentation, serves as an alternative resource for “seeing and

saying” in creative and innovative ways. In the process, students are able to play with their identity as well as their writing voices.

For Turkle, an MIT sociologist who studies the impact of technology on identity, cyberspace provides a conduit for users to explore the multiple personas embodied by the fragmented postmodern self. “The culture of simulation may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves,” claims Turkle (686). Like the secret portal that provides access to the consciousness of John Malkovich in Spike Jones's inventive film *Being John Malkovich*, multi-user domains (MUDs) and chat rooms provide participants with an avenue of alternative experience in the personality of their choosing.

The Matrix celebrates the postmodern concept of a multiple yet integrated identity described by Turkle. Neo is both Thomas Anderson, the corporate lackey, and Neo, the skeptical rebel. The reluctant hero ultimately becomes “The One,” a messianic figure who will save the human race from domination by artificial intelligence. Neo is still Neo, but he's also The One, a personality defined by his function: the one who frees humanity from the metallic grip of the machines. The character Neo becomes a linchpin for these diverse identities in much the same way as a writer serves as the gatekeeper for a multitude of voices.

Derek Owens' observations about the role of writing in constructing identity is also consonant with Turkle's notion of a multiple yet integrated identity. The selves written into existence are multiple, but they are created and linked by an authorial entity. “To write (or paint or perform or compose) is to fashion not so much our identities but bridges that connect various facets of our experience within an incomprehensibly dense and unmapped personal landscape,” he remarks. “The goal may be not only to hypothesize the contours of such a psychic terrain but to revel in the act of serving as the architects (or cartographers) of our own imaginations” (165). Owens' architectural metaphor aptly describes the way that students construct alternative identities through the virtual reality exercise in my classroom. In

his view, “a major component of composition studies involves serving as a site within which writers can explore, devise, and articulate their own personalities and individualities” (162). The virtual reality exercise allows students to accomplish such exploration and articulation.

The exercise begins during the second week of the quarter when students create a virtual persona, designating name, gender, occupation, and personal characteristics. Over the course of seven weeks, they converse anonymously with their classmates through these virtual voices in an electronic discussion board. They are free to post random musings and respond to each other's comments. At the end of the course, students write a short report describing the experience and how it affected their writing.

Such virtual role-playing was a new experience for the majority of students. They responded by creating an array of characters that largely fall into four major categories. One category encompasses superheroes and cartoon characters, such as Spiderman, Homer Simpson, and SpongeBob SquarePants. Other students invented distinctive versions of ordinary people, including a highly literate homeless man from San Francisco and a cynical New York art student whose paintings reflect her anger and alienation. In a third category, virtual personas were derived from fictional characters from film and television, such as Cher from the movie *Clueless* and Hermione from the Harry Potter books and films. A fourth group took on the role of major public figures and celebrities such as Bill Gates and Mariah Carey. In one class, a virtual Brad Pitt shared the electronic discussion board with Tyler Durden, the fictional character Pitt plays in the film *Fight Club*.

Shifting into the perspective of their characters and creating an alternate reality proved challenging for many students. As familiar as she was with Cher Horowitz, the materialistic high-maintenance teenager in *Clueless*, a contemporary reworking of Jane Austen's *Emma*, Heather Motonaga found it rather difficult to emulate the character's voice, which is more casual than her own, and her attitude, which is narrowly focused on fashion and female

gossip. “You cannot be totally clueless when taking on the identity of Cher Horwitz,” Motonaga quips. Yet, she adds, “I found myself at a loss for subjects ... I thought Cher would talk about. I wanted to address topics in the news and elaborate on my feelings about them, yet at the same time I did not feel like these were things that Cher would take an opinion on...”

Caryn Nguyen was similarly challenged by posing as the insufferably bland and monotonous Bill Lumberg, vice president of a software company in the film *Office Space*. “He has the most boring job – a job I would never want,” the first-year writer comments. “So it was hard being him because when I tried to post as him I sometimes made him too happy and giddy like me.” Punctuating her postings with “uhhhs” and “ummm yahhs,” Nguyen developed a monotone style of corporatespeak for her character, in the process abandoning her own more sophisticated style of writing. She concludes that adopting a virtual persona led to the creation of “another person who is a mixture of me and the persona I’m trying to be.”

The experiences of Motonaga and Nguyen suggest that creating such virtual characters may involve the merging of what writers consider dominant patterns in their common forms of discourse with the “alien language” of the identity they construct. Thus, the virtual persona itself becomes a multiple entity, at once strange and familiar.

Other students experienced a merging of virtual reality and real-life events, demonstrating the way in which RL (real life) influences VR (virtual reality). Stacy Edgar’s foray into the world of wizardry as Hermione Granger, from the Harry Potter books and films, was disrupted by discussions about a devastating series of wildfires that swept through Southern California during the quarter. References to the fires, including evacuations from threatened areas, appeared in several of the virtual postings. Describing these postings as the “greatest moment of community” during the project, Edgar notes, “A broad range of characters wrote of the fires. Even Hermione, who supposedly lives in an isolated castle hidden somewhere in England, was affected. This

proves that no matter how we re-create ourselves online, reality will in some way be reflected in some part of that creation. The emotions we feel outside of virtual reality may even dictate our behaviors online...”

At a minimum, the exercise made students more conscious about how to alter their diction and tone for a particular audience. When posing as Kim Possible, a superhero who saves the world while living the life of a typical high school teen, Shirley Kwok kept asking herself, “‘How would Kim say this?’ In this exercise, I had to assume the style of Kim in order to make the character real and convincing. This helps me with my writing ... If I were to write a paper for a certain audience, I would need to learn to obtain [sic] a certain style or tone that suits my audience – so I don't bore them or offend them.”

Playing with a fictional persona gave Matthew Jacobs the chance to reflect on his literary aspirations. “I believe that I learned something about voice or perspective through this dialogue,” he remarks. “Now I think that I notice perspective a little more often and realize how you can use it to shape a story or make it seem more real.” Jacobs concocted Francisco de los Cielos, a sort of contemporary Casanova with a penchant for penning rap-style sonnets. As a writer of such verse himself, Jacobs wonders how young women would respond to receiving such poetic overtures. “I discovered that I was probably using Francisco as a place to test this kind of approach,” he observes. In one of his postings, Jacobs composes an eloquent hip-hip riff on a Shakespearean sonnet that his virtual character delivers to his beloved Vanessa: “Beauty, the craning neck, helpless eye kind, / A site [sic] that forces the eye to follow, / The look of wonder, that does this sight bind, / An all-alluring piece of art to swallow./ Such beauty is not found in girls a’plenty / And here you are, beauty's epitome.”

While I was satisfied with the lessons students learned about writing from their virtual experiences, the exercise went beyond my expectations in that it led to personal revelations for many students. Erin Yao-Cohen, for instance, returned to her

childhood dream of being “a beautiful tiny fairy with incandescent wings” living in “a house made of teeth.” Her persona, Tabitha, works as a dental hygienist by day and transforms into the tooth fairy at night, placing money under the pillows of children who have lost a tooth. In one of her postings, Yao-Cohen urged her readers to maintain their dental hygiene during Halloween: “...your teeth are going to take a beatin’ and as the tooth fairy, it’s gonna make my life a little bit harder.” Another posting describes her attendance at the annual tooth fairy conference: “I don’t think you’ll ever see so many tiny, peppy people all in one place. The conference itself was kind of boring, but I got some pretty cool souvenirs. You can never have too much tooth-related paraphernalia!” Reflecting on her experiences, Yao-Cohen wrote that “since high school I have always viewed myself as a person solely concerned with fact and what can be explained through logic. However, this assignment reveals that there is still a part of me that is excited and intrigued by fantasy and fiction.” The verb that she chooses to describe her experience – “reveals” –affirms the revelatory aspects of the virtual exercise.

Another student writer, Jason Peetz, also made some discoveries about himself through the retreat to fantasy. The UCLA sophomore created a character named the Count of Gaillarde, an Italian nobleman from the early 19th century modeled after Alexandre Dumas’ Count of Monte Cristo. Through this persona, he penned a dashing and adventurous story of betrayal, revenge, and love. In one posting, the Count of Gaillarde describes his desire for retribution: “Death is too good for those who betrayed me. They must see their lives, everything they hold dear, stripped from them as it was from me.I cannot love, and I cannot be happy, so there is no other reason for me to live other than to seek my revenge.” After examining his virtual adventures, Peetz concluded that “I have an underlying desire to control destiny.I have met many virtuous people in my life and I have also met many selfish, evil people in my life. To me it seems that the virtuous people get bad karma whereas the evil people get lucky and succeed in life.I wish I could

distribute good karma to those who deserve it and punish others who do not deserve it.” Taking pleasure in his ability to serve as a “commander of providence,” at least in the virtual world, Peetz concludes that virtual reality can be a “strong self-analysis tool.”

Other students settled for more humble, less heroic personas. Lisa Loeb, for instance, chose to create Miss Honey Owens, a feisty 58-year-old Virginia native who runs a baked goods country store and marvels at the birth of a grandchild: “My back is achin’, my feet are sore, and I am crazy with happiness! Today my third grandchild was born. She is the most beautiful 4 lb. 8 oz. mini-person that was ever created. . . . Oh, there ain’t nothin’ as magic as seeing a new person come into this world!” Taking on the persona of someone so different from her gave Loeb some valuable insights: “She is large and older, yet could care less about those physical attributes, caring only about what is inside. Her personality is also very strong, having many characteristics that I wish were more prominent in myself. I only realized this after she was created, as if [by] giving my make-believe person certain traits, they might somehow rub off onto my real self. There were certain aspects of her life that I realized I longed for. I gave her a large, close family, something that I have never had but always wanted.” For Loeb, the opportunity to inhabit the mind of a woman so different from herself offered her a new vantage point from which to view her life and her personality.

While students such as Yao-Cohen, Peetz, and Loeb found moments of revelation through virtual writing, other students viewed the exercise as a catalyst for personal transformation. One student decided to pursue a psychology major after creating a persona that dabbled in the discipline. Another student, Michelle DeDios, gained strength from the ability to revisit an anguished phase of her life through creating Clara, a New York painter who experiences death and hatred. By the end of the postings, Clara changes her dark vision: “Choosing to no longer be afraid of pain and loss, she walks into the world a strong, optimistic woman ready for the challenges that might come her way.” While DeDios took pleasure in the opportunity to create a fictitious character,

she achieved an even deeper sense of satisfaction from virtual writing: "It allowed me to come to terms with some of the ghosts of my past, something that I did not expect to gain from an English assignment."

In what proved another transformative experience, student Kirstin Rojo gained a sense of empowerment from exploring her virtual persona. She assumed the character of Lana Lang, Clark Kent's secret love in *Smallville*, the television series based on the Superman comic strip. As a first-year student at UCLA, Rojo could identify with Lang's struggle to find a fulfilling role for herself beyond high school. "In several ways, I have defined my persona through this virtual reality exercise," she observes. "I began my quest at UCLA as a scared, unsure, and indefinite student. As I got accustomed to writing about Lana, I felt like I had more power to shape my characteristics. If Lana Lang was able to get out of Smallville, then what is stopping me from graduating from UCLA?"

Just as virtual writing proved to be a powerful vehicle for transformation in my classroom, Neo used virtual powers to complete his metamorphosis from vulnerable protagonist to self-assured superhero. Although the virtual reality of the Matrix cannot tell Neo who he is, the personality shifts through which he passes in VR allow him to experience the "multiple but integrated" identity described by Turkle. Similarly, for my students, virtual reality didn't produce a sense of a stable and definite self, but that wasn't the aim of the project anyway. In fact, both the film and the students participating in my virtual exercise went beyond asking "Who am I?" to ponder instead "Who might I become?" In exploring that question, my students were able to gain a glimpse of the alternative voices that constitute their identities and to recognize the role that writing plays in revealing and transforming their experiences in the real world.

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