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Cyberhotels & Other Tales of Forgotten Virtual Worlds

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I spent a great deal of early teenhood online. I drifted from MySpace to MSN Messenger to Habbo Hotel to pretty much any other virtual social space I could find. My main love was customisation and it still is. This time spent online was my escape but also a way to connect with people just like me. During the COVID pandemic, a large number of new 3D virtual environments popped up as a way to connect people in a time of complete isolation. Whether companies opted for digital replicas of the office or art festivals tried to mimic a bar to network within, 3D digital spaces became more and more prolific. However, the previous iterations of the online virtual spaces of my youth seemed radically different from those that populate the internet today. Less common were the fantasy lands of imagined creatures, and in their place stand the hyperreal 3D environments of offices and landmarks. My early experiences of agonising over avatar customisation and adding more and more unrealistic elements like wings and extra limbs were now switched for detailed contouring makeup to look as realistic as humanly possible, often entering the realms of the uncanny valley. When and why did they switch my beloved wings for hyper-realistic skins? Where did my weird customisation disappear to?

I started to question the shift and try to examine the trajectory that brought us here. Has modernisation quietened the impossible and the 'other' in favour of space that is more relatable and recognisable? If I try to follow the pathways from the virtual worlds of Habbo Hotel and Neopets to Mark Zuckerberg's promises of the Metaverse, it's hard not to notice the constant loop of planned utopias to abandoned ruins, so what if we were to interject and turn these anticipated ruins into possible playgrounds to rebuild from? We could have wings and way too many limbs all over again. These digital spaces already mirror those of the physical realm where playful utopian buildings by architects like Richard England have been reduced to desolate wastelands, waiting to be turned into cut and paste modern housing. When did world builders begin to alienate artistic expression? With the boundless space of the internet, why do they create these spaces that already exist in our physical reality, and how can we reimagine their forgotten futures to embrace expression and creativity?

Utopias

When I think of a utopia, my mind tends to go straight to Disneyland, the famous brainchild of Walt Disney. Many architectural scholars have used this as a case study in the quest for building utopias, and it's not hard to see why. Credited as the man who birthed the 'experience economy', Walt Disney grew up obsessed with the miniature landscapes he visited on movie sets. With this in mind, he began to imagine a place in which a new emotional environment could exist. Starting with his animation studios, he molded them into replicas of

cartoons and was congratulated upon this "physical utopia" that was constructed. Not satisfied with this, plans were set in motion to create an entire theme park that could be likened to a giant movie set, but in which one could be completely immersive. Giving the engineers the title of 'Imagineers', he wanted to foster the creation of a collective imaginary, a place where both adults and children could be lost among the fantasy. Disney himself saw the park as a three-dimensional film and created Main Street, a shopping street with bright colours and idyllic facades. The final step in Disney's utopia was to create a whole community that experienced the magic of the park, staging experiences. This was the beginning of Disneyworld in Florida. The thing that set Disneyworld apart from the previous park projects was the community aspect that Disney tried to achieve when designing EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow). He went as far as to have it established as a multi-city in Florida state legislation to secure rights for inhabitation, allowing him to exercise control over the tenants who resided there. He continued his obsession with EPCOT right until he died in 1966, citing it as "the overriding passion of his life". But inevitably the utopian promise never prevailed. I visited Disneyworld back in 2000 when I was 8 years old and vividly remember the prolonged queueing for these attractions and the overwhelming need to buy hotdogs and merch, it was less of a movie set, more a micro-transactional experience. All I wanted was to be in the fantasy.

After the ideas of chasing utopia started circulating within architecture, many people in the industry jumped aboard. One of the most recognised examples of this is Le Corbusier. Born in Switzerland, but later becoming a French citizen in 1930, Le Corbusier had many projects featuring utopian ideals. Perhaps his most famous work, Unité d'Habitation in Marseille was designed as an all-encompassing resort-style project that was entirely self-contained. Next to housing residents, the building boasted a space to 'shop, play, live, and come together in a "vertical garden city."' Described as a city within a city, Unité d'Habitation contained shopping facilities, a kindergarten, a pool, and even a small hotel. Chasing my favourite architectural icons, I visited the housing project a few years back and was disappointed to find that while the building still stood, and it was incredibly inspiring architecturally speaking, the bustling atmosphere I expected to find was absent. The corridors remained dark and silent, and the commercial spaces were closed off. How could something built with such big dreams be this empty?

It wasn't just Disney and Le Corbusier who suffered from the dreams of optimistic utopia building. When visiting Malta, as my first vacation post COVID, I searched out the projects of Richard England, one of my favourite architects. England was fascinated with childlike playfulness and a number of buildings in his hometown of Malta reflected this. Pastel colours, geometric forms, and peaceful lines filled an almost dreamlike stage of architecture and offered an

alternative to the conventional spaces that the island offered. You can only imagine my utter horror when visiting these sites to find them completely demolished or abandoned in favour of more run-of-the-mill housing that populated the space surrounding the original sites. I don't know if it was grief or the fact that it was 38 degrees Celsius and I was descending into madness, but my first reaction was to desperately circle the perimeter to try to prove my own eyes wrong. However, despite my prescription, I wasn't wrong, these buildings which seemed like a dream to me were just gone. I was really starting to notice that all these projects designed with such creativity were almost destined to fail.

With the physical buildings I loved failing all around me, I would seek solace in the social spaces online. Intrigued by their design and user capabilities, I was signed up to several of these spaces at once. I became obsessed with designing my characters, their environments but also nurturing the friendships I made inside these spaces. Every night at 7 pm– the internet was much cheaper on off-peak hours– I would excitedly run to my home's computer room, and log into Habbo Hotel, my favourite virtual world. Habbo Hotel was created by Sulake in 2000, the same year as my upsetting trip to Disneyworld. I was instantly in love. Habbo is made up of a series of public rooms designed by the developers of the platform, while also allocating every user with a private room to design as they please, be it a personal hangout space or a replica of a real-life organisation or even, if you are so inclined, a McDonald's. Creating my character with a striped vest, an eyepatch, and some sort of weapon I never quite figured out (it was purely for show), I entered my first room and became enamoured with blocky pixel-based design. My language became integrated with A/S/L? (age, sex, language) & "Bobba", the censored version of any bad word. A big part of what made Habbo so great for me was the creativity and expression it contained in the roleplay aspects of the game. I could become a contestant on Habbo's Next Top Model or try my hand at joining a mafia organisation, just by moving from room to room. I visited Habbo for at least six years. Out of curiosity, I would check Habbo Hotel every now and then, and unfortunately, every time I would log in, it seemed fewer and fewer users were populating these rooms. What happened?

If you look at the early writings about the goals and potential future of the internet, it can feel quite jarring. In 1995, the Critical Art Ensemble made an address in Hamburg which was later published as the appendix of *Flesh Machine* titled *Utopian Promises – Net Realities*. In the piece, the CAE addresses a number of things promised of the Internet including community, democracy, the new body, and convenience of use. The most interesting points to me are the arguments surrounding community. They argue that a lot of these 'social' spaces exploit the alienation we feel as a society, and instead serve as spaces of 'forced consumption' further removing ourselves from the potential of true connections which can be achieved through kinship and shared experiences

of a community. Perhaps these spaces I inhabited as a teenager were so special to me because of the perceived relationships I was making when I didn't subscribe to the heavily priced membership fees. There were always ways for me to spend money within these worlds, whether it was buying new skins or special edition furniture, but I slowly learned that my love of spending time in these worlds wasn't grounded in this.

With the increasing rate of social platforms popping up on the internet, it was a matter of time before I was signing up for a Facebook account. The main reason for me creating an account was due to my friends and classmates doing the same thing. It was a way to join this concept of an online community all over again. Prior to Facebook, I had a lot of experience with another social network, the sorely missed Myspace (RIP). Myspace was the beginning of around 75% of my friendships when I was younger. It attracted creative minds with its ability to offer users the full customisability of their personal page. I don't think I'm alone in stating that Myspace was my first love affair with web design, and my page was my platform to express myself with any small HTML & CSS changes I could make. Myspace was my utopia. The beauty of it was the infinite combinations of colour, font, and backgrounds I could put together to express myself at that moment in time. Don't even get me started on the possibility of an animated background. In those delicate years of early teenhood, having an online space to be creative was absolutely vital. I still have a lot of the relationships I forged with my profile song and art style to this day. So, my first mission when creating a profile on Facebook was to try and give some of my flair to the page like I had done so with Myspace. Imagine my heartbreak when all I could change was my picture and a cover photo. Without the ability to add custom colors or introduce my personality with fun backgrounds, my profile felt empty. The entry into customising the code of my page was blocked. My expression was stifled.

I puzzled and puzzled over this shift in direction on social platforms and I guess the one thing I could really blame was the rapid hand of modernisation. Technology moves at an accelerated pace and what may look good one day will look horrifically dated the next. The 'platformisation' of these social spaces can be definitely traced to the increasing standardisation of the Internet. The modular boxes and clean minimalistic design we see on most pages scattered around the web. Susan Leigh Star talks of technology becoming "hidden and frozen in black boxes, inaccessible to users". We are excluded from the creative process in order to maintain some sort of standard order, the conventional, only accessible to those who own the platforms. What once felt like an open space to express and create, is now at the mercy of the higher powers, the CEOs.

When a social network or platform becomes centralised, the means of editing code and personalisation becomes completely impenetrable. The standards

and decisions become opaque, and we are left on the outside, having to accept what we have been given. In Susan Leigh Star's piece *On Being Allergic to Onions*, she muses how these standards become the norm. Users find comfort in the perceived simplicity, "externalities of structure, density of communication populations and already established maintenance", therefore keep returning to this space, while competitors use these models as templates to build from, thus creating an online world that is wildly indiscernible from webpage to webpage. The other harmful aspect of the centralised network is its ability to create a 'Walled Garden'. For the sake of this essay, I will be using Annet Dekker's definition of the walled garden, outlined in her book of the same name in 2009.

A Walled Garden has:

1. Entrances & exits
2. There are keepers with a gardener's mentality:
content tending, no weeds, no trash.
3. Control is at the gate:
security, surveillance, and gatekeeping.

Facebook can easily be described as a walled garden if we use the criteria mentioned. Often described as an online gated community that combs through the posted information, editing profusely. It can otherwise be known as an echo chamber. When we surround ourselves with only like-minded people, the probability of hearing a differing opinion is slim and thus helps foster an 'us vs them' narrative, the space for the difference is immediately rejected and seen as unconventional. This goes back to the idea that standardisation is a created, not organic, practice. The 'other' is simply not included. In the same book, there is a call for experimental zones, spaces to exchange and use digital virtuality as the sandbox to create and play again. The complete opposite of the Walled Garden.

While standardisation can be an excellent way to read the cultural values of that time and a tool to read the historical context from the time in which they were set, Star states that we need to invoke the ambiguity and fuzziness of these systems to really understand how we can express ourselves. When we look into the embedded strangeness or into the background, we find the personal touches which seem to be absent from our current internet landscape. She tells us to find the invisible through the traces of the coders, designers, and users as a way to counteract the "mess obscured by boring sameness". While it is hugely expensive to create a platform that hosts different standards, we can become multiple to participate in different threads of multiple worlds that already exist. She goes on to say that "stabilising networks seem to insist on annihilating our personal experience, causing denial or the co-causality of multiple selves and standards." So, by invoking the multiple we can involve ourselves in many spaces, expressing ourselves through meaningful collective consequences and

then giving ourselves numerous spaces to play and create selves. A way of decentralising the networks.

When my beloved online spaces fell into disuse due to these systems and standards, my once teenhood utopia became ruins of a potential future abandoned in favour of modernisation. But what if these ruins became bridges to understanding these spaces and their forgotten futures? A way to understand what their original purpose was and how to activate these traces to learn more about their histories? After all, the richness of utopia building is in the dreams and promises that go into them.

Ruins

"The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society."

Marc Auge, 1992

In 1992, Marc Auge, a french anthropologist, coined the term 'Non-Place'. A non-place can largely be summed up as a transient space trapped in time that does not hold enough significance to be regarded as a "place" in an anthropological sense. These spaces are characterised by their lack of identity and society, a place where humans can remain anonymous as they pass through along their way. Aesthetically speaking, non-places have a hauntingly familiar feeling but feel devoid of life or history. They suffer from a sense of isolation and become an abstraction to those who move through them. Auge wrote that "non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified". They represent a very specific moment in history and unknowingly share both visual and metaphysical characteristics between each space.

Typically, a non-place is a space of passing rather than a space to stop and inhabit. However, often they are revisited, occurring in our lives fleetingly, and slowly but surely, they begin to occupy a space of familiarity over time. Common examples of non-places include airports, hotel chains, highways, and shopping malls. My most recognised example of a non-place is my doctor's waiting room. While there, my identity is checked at entry and once I take my seat upon the horribly uncomfortable plastic chair, I am waiting. All I can do in this space is hope for the next stage of the visit to come quickly while trying to ignore the poor selection of art on the wall. I am in between.

With the idea of a non-place in mind, we turn to the possibility of a virtual, or online, non-place. If we focus on the transient nature of these spaces, early virtual worlds can be seen as present-day non-places residing online. As well as their undeniable transience, like physical non-places, identity is only confirmed upon entry, this means you are given the freedom to float through the

environment like a ghost. Early iterations of virtual worlds such as my favourites, Habbo Hotel, and Second Life, now possess an almost liminal quality with the shift from bustling worlds to almost abandoned wastelands. Once visited by hundreds and thousands of teenagers, these spaces were bubbles of social activity. However, when visiting in 2022, the population of these platforms has declined rapidly. The dwindling number of users is reflected in the empty rooms that once were completely crowded. At one point, it was almost impossible to locate your own avatar in the sea of people online.

Occasionally these spaces are revisited in a wave of nostalgia but overall, engagement is largely a passive peek into the past rather than a dedicated attempt at repopulation. A fleeting dance with a fond memory rather than a serious bid to revitalise the largely forgotten. When I return to these worlds, I am struck by an unsettling yet strangely familiar feeling. This feeling can be described as kenopsia. Kenopsia is a term defined by John Koenig in the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows in 2003. The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows started as a web blog in the early 2000s as a space that gave names to the feelings and experiences we share in our current society that were previously undefined. Kenopsia is described as an "eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place that's usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet". You will often experience this feeling in physical spaces, for example, schools after hours or office buildings during weekends or holidays. Koenig goes on to describe these spaces as "an emotional afterimage that makes it seem not just empty but hyper-empty, with a total population in the negative, who are so conspicuously absent they glow like neon signs."

When spaces become empty online, they take on the form of digital ruins, but in order to understand what this means, I will define ruins in their physical form. Ruins are classically described as the remains of architecture and civilisation. Whether these ruins were damaged by natural or unnatural causes, they become progressively derelict due to poor maintenance and abandonment, becoming fragments of a past form left for us to reconstruct. Ruins can often be both a snapshot of the past and a fragment of a future, meanwhile, serving as a stark reminder of the passage of time. In this same vein, the concept of romantic ruins or false ruins were also built for this purpose. In the 18th century, false ruins were popping up across Europe as a desirable addition to landowner's properties to demonstrate decadence and extravagance. The idea of the ruin was becoming romanticised.

Ruins can also serve as a space in which former life has departed. In its place lie traces of interaction, presenting a new form of its past. Through these traces, we are asked to fill in the blanks with our imagination of what could have been. A ruin's "fragmentary, unfinished nature is an invitation to fulfil the as yet explored temporality that it contains." Walter Benjamin remarks that when we

revisit the past, we must forget everything we know about the future in our approach. By doing this we can situate ourselves in the period of ruin without modern interferences. But memory is key in the study of ruins, sometimes even replacing the ruins themselves. Rebecca Solnit writes that " Forgetting is the ruin of memory" but unlike memory, the ruins are reminders or "treasures" left behind for us as links to both the past and also how to situate ourselves in the present.

The idea of the past is often what is conjured up in the study of ruins, but surprisingly they can help us to imagine or unearth a potential future. The gathering and assembling of residual narratives, left as traces, help us to reconstruct a set of abandoned futures or aid us in the construction of fake pasts. This same idea also applies to studying digital ruins.

Digital ruins can often take the form of forgotten platforms or abandoned virtual worlds. Some, such as VMK (Virtual Magic Kingdom, Disney's attempt at 3D virtual worlds) & Club Penguin, are completely shut down, a distant memory in some of our pre-teen minds, whereas others, Habbo Hotel & Second Life, quietly try to continue with a fraction of their previous audience. While not strictly ruins in the traditional sense, they have the same fragmentary nature, with traces of life spilling out, suggesting the former highly populated spaces situated in the room's layout and design.

In an interview with artist and designer Mariana Marangoni, she refers to this phenomenon as internet entropy. Due to the accelerated pace of the Internet, spaces and domains lie dormant, with the rate of noise becoming consistently higher than the rate of information. The entropy from this disconnect allows for decay to form, eventually turning spaces online into digital forms of ruins. She argues that the functional internet is "just the tip of the iceberg surrounded by a sea of noise." Digital ruins often invoke a feeling of trespassing online. When you come across the countless 404 pages or dormant domains, you are confronted with a feeling that you shouldn't be present in this space, as if you are unwelcome. These pages are hidden away to cover up the decay they possess. Behind the visual representation of decay, we are often shielded by the deprecated code that comes from this abandonment, the viruses and malicious code adding to the feeling of danger and trespassing. Marangoni states that because these pages remind us of our failures or shortcomings, we turn away from this, rather than residing in the comfortable and 'accessible' spaces of the internet.

These ruins and abandoned spaces online also trigger one of the most powerful emotions of all: nostalgia. In Grafton Tanner's book *The Hours Have Lost their Clock*, he refers to nostalgia as the "defining feeling of our time" in our period of remakes and reboots. First coined by Johannes Hofer during Revolutionary

France, it was defined as an "intense pathological longing for homeland" and was frequently encountered among soldiers in the military. These soldiers were often 'diagnosed' with nostalgia and it was also often listed as the cause of death for a large number of these individuals. Over time, nostalgia was no longer recognised as a disease and instead was reconsidered as an emotion. Svetlana Boym describes two main types of nostalgia; restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia is seen as the less favoured of the two, as often this is the most destructive and harmful. Usually, this is the result of fear of what's to come where heritage is placed above history and the absolute need for things to go back to the 'way they were' leads to things such as racism, misogyny, and homophobia. On the other hand, is reflective nostalgia, the more playful of the two. This form relies on subversion, irony, and contradiction and looks at ruins as the patina of time, taking itself far less seriously and is altogether seen as less dangerous (within the lens of nostalgia).

In a society of huge acceleration, the farther I step into the future, the more my nostalgia grows. Stemming from the lack of control and feelings of instability nostalgia translates into a yearning for the comforts of our past, however, misremembered that may be. Even in the conversation with Mariana Marangoni, she vividly remembers her first experiences of using the internet and the nostalgia of the dial-up sounds, and how to access the web. "We also had specific times of the day, especially on weekdays, it was only after midnight that the fees would be lower. So, we just had to wait. Or maybe just skip bed altogether." We all have our own distinct memories of logging on as a teenager, yet we also know the sheer annoyance of waiting for the process to complete and grant access. Despite this, there is a collective nostalgia over this kind of memory.

Nostalgia often creates a shared sense of community and experience. Homogenisation grows a form of nostalgia for the local or more niche spaces, which can also be likened to Olia Lialina and her ideas of the Vernacular Web. She argues the DIY and experimental approach has been pushed out in favour of templates and platformised design. Communities of people online get lost or abandoned along the way when transferred to the corporate social media spaces from their previous worlds. This breeds a feeling of alienation and absence of expression. We are then presented with clickbait lists of 'bad' website design and dated virtual worlds as it offers a much-needed window into the past, one that felt more human and handmade. Often our love of low-tech online spaces and pages comes from the conflation of timelines online. There is a need to escape from this idea of the vanishing present in which time moves so quickly and seek solace in the spaces we can understand. A lot of the time, these spaces online are reminders of what could have been, an unfulfilled promise or a lost future. What if we used nostalgia as a reawakening, a way to combine the past with the present and unravel the history of lost realities? In the

final line of Tanner's book, he states "Deep in those hidden spaces is where you'll find the future." Perhaps we can start here?

Before going any further, it should be a given that we cannot save every forgotten space online. Collective efforts would be completely exhausted within just the first five percent. Some spaces are simply doomed to be forgotten. However, accounting for these anticipated ruins is a practice within itself that can offer us new ways to look to the future. Architect Lebbeus Woods builds structures that are designed with their abandoned later forms in mind. When designing, Woods establishes ways of incorporating materials in his structures that would thrive and shine in periods of decay and ruin. Embracing the inevitable, so to speak. In *Mushroom at the End of the World* by Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing, Tsing questions if we are able to draw histories from what emerges from the ruins. What can be taken from those fragments? This is where we can begin to see histories coming through and telling the stories of the forgotten futures. Tsing also mentions the term 'polyphonic assemblages' as a method of gathering these tracks and traces. Simply put, in this context, it encompasses the layering of both expert knowledge and the vernacular experience, using both in harmony to unearth the rich histories of ruins. Using this method, we can grasp the histories with both studied aspects and experiential stories and memories. Through our imagined common ground, what if we can reclaim these spaces as a figure of the here and now, rather than archaic iconography of a past that seems so far away?

I want to end with the concept of zombie media. A phrase coined by Jussi Parikka & Garnet Hertz, they state "zombie media is concerned with media that is not only out of use but resurrected to new uses, contexts, and adaptations.". They argue that media never fully dies but instead decays and rots and becomes reinterpreted. "It either stays in the soil as residue and in the air as concrete dead media, or it is re-appropriated through artistic, tinkering methodologies." If we could take these digital ruins and try to reanimate and adapt them for new ideas or resurface lost ideas, we could attempt to continue its future, intervening before it becomes forgotten.

Playgrounds

"Synthetic worlds, it seems, almost never die."

In order to examine if these abandoned or partially empty virtual worlds are able to be used in new ways, it is time to take a dive into a brief history of these worlds. The majority of social spaces online started out as chat rooms and community spaces, eventually evolving into MUDs (multi-user dungeons) in 1978. MUDs collectively can be described as a virtual world with multiple users interacting together inside it, in real-time, however, due to the capabilities of

technology at this time, these were mostly text-based. MUDs paved the way for the next iteration of what we now call virtual worlds, the MMORPG or massively multiplayer online role-playing games. MMORPGs burst onto the scene using role-playing as a way to interact and this eventually set the precedent for the virtual worlds we know today. The first online virtual world is credited to Habitat, released for the Commodore 64 by LucasFilms in 1987. Just 13 years later, my beloved Habbo Hotel joined the list of worlds and firmly planted itself as one of the most popular and longest-running virtual worlds to date.

In Edward Castronova's book *Synthetic Worlds*, he examines the culture and business of online games. He defines these spaces as "crafted places inside computers that are designed to accommodate large numbers of people." They emerge from the video game industry as 'playgrounds of imagination' and over time, users spend their time inside them catering to regular everyday human affairs such as maintaining friendships and tidying up their virtual rooms. When I originally started playing in these worlds, I was well aware of games like *World of Warcraft* and the huge genre of fantasy-based roleplaying games. In these worlds, you could become great warriors or mages and traverse lands in ways that resembled epic video games. These types of worlds grew huge populations of users wanting to step outside of reality and welcome the impossible. You could level up your costumes, join guilds and partake in missions while garnering friendships and being social. But much like every industry, virtual worlds displayed emerging trends, users wanted more realistic elements and these spaces began to replicate our everyday surroundings. Now I could construct a full-scale replica of my favourite burger restaurant in Habbo Hotel, and visitors could play the role of real-life customers.

A shift came with the aesthetics of these worlds with the death of Flash. Flash was the browser plugin responsible for the animations and interactivity of early virtual spaces. Designed in 1996 by Adobe, Flash allowed designers to create fast-loading moving content that could be downloaded quickly when the world was still relying on dial-up connections.

“PshhhkkkkkkrrrrkakingkakingEEEEEEEEEEEEkakingtshchchchchchchcch*ding
*ding*ding”

This allowed for anyone to create content and have it run on their personal websites which made for an influx of games, videos, and viral content popping up all over the internet. But Flash was not a total expressive utopia, one of the main hits that Flash took was in the security department. It was easily hackable so Adobe would have to continuously release patches to overcome the constant hacking, thus creating a major headache for Adobe. However, the final straw was when the world shifted to mobile connections, Apple had just released the first iPhone and Adobe was slow on the uptake in making Flash responsive and

supported on these devices. Alas, most of the animations and interactive content could no longer run. Adobe announced that Flash would be fully disabled by 2021. With Flash no longer supported, virtual world developers shifted to newer and newer technologies, and with each one, these worlds became more and more realistic.

In-world advertising also became a huge part of these spaces, with huge corporations such as Coca-Cola & Disney joining the virtual world hype. Interestingly enough, both worlds created by these two corporations, Disney's Virtual Magic Kingdom (VMK) and Coca-Cola's MyCoke have since completely shut down. Both worlds contained the aspects of a typical virtual world such as a personal avatar, social features (chat), and in-game currency, but what separated them from spaces like Habbo Hotel, were the constant bombardment of each company's products. In MyCoke, your avatar could drink Coca-Cola products in-game, and VMK had replicas of the different Disney theme parks, plastered with Disney imagery. These worlds didn't make it past 2010 due to the cost of running these platforms outweighing profit made through product placement. I remember both fondly for the social aspect, but alas the blatant commercialisation turned me off inhabiting these spaces in the long term.

It's hard to talk about virtual worlds without mentioning, probably the most famous. Second life was created in 2003 with hopes of being "the world's greatest Lego kit". In a lecture with its founder, Philip Rosedale, he spoke of the goals he had in mind when building this huge realistic world. He wanted the world to act as a playground to build anything the heart desired, and fundamentally, that goal has been achieved. It is said that we will never be able to view all of the Second Life worlds as there are simply too many created. However, SL evolved further than a creative playground. Linden Dollars are the currency of the game and with these dollars, you can buy skins, land, and even create an in-game business. Many people joined the wave of the latter. Rosedale states that he created this in-game currency as a way to sustain engagement, and by doing this, users could create a living by selling property and creative goods within the platform. The values of our physical world had travelled into the virtual with the idea that wealth could give a level of status within the world. Introducing a currency also allowed artists to use the platform in innovative ways to gain a living in their real lives. Many music artists could now build a space and host a show while being paid for this. This caught on in a massive way and we still see these types of events happening semi-regularly in virtual space to this day.

With the shift in the aesthetics came also the shift in the functionality of these worlds. There was an increase in worlds that functioned on a purely social level. Castronova writes that as these worlds usually do not include much actual content and users are left to their own devices to create entertainment, be that

with communication, activities or designs. The users in this case create their own worlds and bubbles of meaning which foster tight-knit communities and relationships. The increase in these worlds was also due to their ease of set-up and minimal management once established. Developers would design the terrain and the means of social activity, perhaps a few minigames, and then the users could make of that what they will. These worlds are often larger and are purely designed as a place to hang out. Going back to Second Life as an example, these spaces allow for the free reign of users to create buildings, businesses and ultimately, their own society.

To truly inhabit these societies and spaces, I wanted to look into the blurriness of real-life and virtual life for the communities who spend time in these worlds, and what makes someone want to join them. When trying to paint a picture of a 'typical' user, I found most people who spend time in virtual worlds also crossover into the video game world. Previous studies (Yee, 2001) into the inhabitants of these worlds show that the users are predominantly male (84%) and two-thirds of all users have a full-time job. A couple of popular musings to why someone would sign up to these worlds is the act of escapism and the potentialities of joining a community. In Castronova's chapter on the user, he states that the social and communal aspect of the game is a huge draw for users, as virtual worlds can help even the biggest outcast find a safe space. The plurality of worlds ensures that there is an option for everyone and the roleplaying aspect really begins to encourage a form of alternative expression. In the Second Skin documentary by Juan Carlos Pineiro-Escoriaza of 2009, virtual world players often stated that these virtual worlds are often just better versions of their physical equivalents. You are transported into this pixel-perfect form of the world, a form of utopia. Everyone starts these profiles at the same level, social status or wealth doesn't play a part in the beginning, you grow together. Virtual worlds are malleable enough in which almost anything can be built there which helps users create spaces that simply do not exist for them in their everyday life. It is easy to see how a user becomes addicted and embedded within these worlds, I know I did.

When you sign up for an account on one of these virtual worlds, you are, more often than not, assigned an avatar to represent you within the rooms or world in which you inhabit. In the customisation phase, there is always a point when I would begin to see this avatar as an extension of myself and therefore, if someone didn't like my avatar, by definition, they also didn't like me. I began thinking of adding an eyepatch that would suit 'me' and the distinction between my physical and virtual body would slowly fade. Nonetheless, it's not just my appearance and my virtual self that began to blend, the relationships I started to forge became fuzzy too. As I mentioned earlier, a lot of my friends in real life started off as friends I spoke to solely online. Gradually the relationship

transitioned to 'real life' however the strength of these friendships didn't change despite our emergence from beyond the screen.

But people grow up right? I admittedly do not use these spaces anywhere as much as I did in my early teens, but that doesn't mean I think they should fall to ruin. So why do users keep returning? Speaking from my own experience, I can see that once the emotional connection has been established with a space, it is only natural to care about how it's doing in your absence. Add into that any monetary investment you've made in a platform, and, of course, you can never fully leave. But that's not just it, I've spoken multiple times of the community aspect of these worlds. It's hard to abandon a space you've spent time and energy fostering. Groups formed on these platforms often move to new platforms but will always hold a fondness in their hearts for the place that started it all. I guess this is why I and many other communities are dedicated to the idea of keeping these spaces alive. Once a user is used to visiting these worlds, we can never quite give it up completely.

I gave a workshop in late 2021 where I presented participants with a cardboard model of a virtual space, a room in Habbo Hotel, and asked them to draw both their ideal avatar and also write how they would want to spend their time there. Out of eleven responses, only one person drew a realistic humanoid character as their ideal avatar to represent them. I was immediately happy, maybe the desire for the bizarre in character design was still there. I also determined from the submissions that there were three very clear ideas for how users desired to spend time, one to create or redesign, two to make communities/interest-based groups or finally, the third, to just hide away from it all and observe. My dreams were shared. I wasn't the only one craving or asking for this. But how can I make these spaces public again to satisfy all these dreams?

Habbo Hotel, Second Life, and a fan-made MySpace are all still online today. So how can we honour their original goals and give in to our expression and creativity all over again? Everest Pipkin wrote a piece entitled 'I Know a Place: Beauty and solace in the abandoned worlds of Roblox'. Here they talk about how the majority of Roblox places sit empty with statuses such as "0 active, 0 favourites, 0 visits". Is this what Mariana Marangoni spoke of when she mentioned the entropy of the internet? Most of these abandoned places are still accessible, you just have to know where to find them. Pipkin recounts tales of parties in World of Warcraft and declares these spaces as "waiting indefinitely to be stumbled on again". All of these worlds are networked together, laying empty until they are spontaneously dropped in on again, they even have a stream that explores the "deep-cut, experimental and abandoned worlds". Is this the Internet's answer to The Arcades Project, the massive historical retelling of Parisian arcades from Walter Benjamin?

Benjamin's Arcades Project can definitely be looked at as a method to retrace these spaces as flaneurs. Just through touring the worlds, we can discover the motivations, expressions, and goals of these designed utopias which can help us understand the world through experience. As I mentioned earlier, traces can really be a way to piece together forgotten futures and lost ideas. What if we were to take Benjamin's approach when uncovering these spaces? What could they teach us about what we desire and need as human beings in terms of creativity and expression? Many restorative efforts have been made to recover online spaces that disappeared from the web as a side effect of rapid modernisation. Restorativland, for example, created an entire project out of putting together lost Geocities pages as close to their original form as possible. Mirrors of taken down much loved virtual worlds and platforms pop up more and more every day from Club Penguin to SpaceHey (A fan-made version of Myspace).

We can also embrace the Net Art route and use the affordances of these worlds as canvasses to create. Net Art is hard to define absolutely but can be described as artwork based in or on Internet cultures, it is created from "an awareness of, or deep involvement, in a world transformed and affected by elaborate technical ensembles", an explanation from Josephine Bosma's 'Nettitudes. On a Journey through Net Art'. With this definition, I could argue that net art would be a perfect way to honour these forgotten spaces. Rather than allowing these spaces to become prey to capitalistic desires with the monetisation of these spaces as a leading cause of the abandonment of these virtual havens (I'm looking at you Habbo, with your plans to incorporate NFTs), we could use the building aspects of both the environment and a community to tell the stories of these spaces and what they truly meant, and still mean, to the users who love them. Habbo Hotel recently experienced a loss of 56% of its members when the in-game bartering system was disbanded. Thousands of users lost a lot of money and with this, began deleting their accounts. Ultimately this also means that a lot more spaces became empty. What could become of these rooms? As I've said roleplay and design played a huge part in the worlds I inhabited so to continue using these methods as a way to tell the forgotten futures could be the next logical step in reusing them.

Mark Zuckerberg has warned us that the Metaverse is coming. Metaverse weddings have already taken place and architectural firms have cornered the virtual real estate market. A network of 3D virtual worlds focused on social connection, you would think this is something I would be wildly excited about. But judging by what Zuck did to social network platforms, I really doubt this is about creativity and expression and instead is 100% a money grab. What if we all politely rejected this proposal and spent our time rebuilding and retelling these original spaces instead? I for one cannot sit by and let the Metaverse

become the standardised version of my cherished virtual spaces. No way. These forgotten futures need to be told.

Conclusion

When spaces both online and offline begin as utopias, they are often destined to fail from the unscalable promises embedded within them. However, there is a richness in how these spaces were originally designed to foster creativity, expression, and difference. The affordances of these worlds often serve as a platform to encourage play and action, and we cannot simply let them lie as ruins in a vastly overpopulated space. Speaking about virtual worlds specifically, we can look to the failed platforms as pathways to understand the magic and nostalgia they possess and forge new uses encapsulating their original goals and potentialities. But we don't even need to only reuse these spaces, a lot of the beauty in their decay is the stories and memories they invoke, the way in which they paint a picture of the society and culture of the time in which they were designed. Whether their traces help us create new things or simply act as flaneurs for us to learn from, I firmly believe these spaces possess an otherworldly quality. It is not about reinventing the wheel, rather helping the wheel exist before it rusts to a point of becoming unrecognisable.

The sheer amount of restorative efforts and playful retelling of these spaces shows just how important they are to the communities that once occupied them. Lives were lived, friends were made and personalities and expressions were developed through these platforms. The fact that, even though Facebook is still the most massively populated social network, a small community of developers has created a mirror site for Myspace (SpaceHey), stands to show the desire and need to have these spaces online is still very much present. To me, this goes beyond nostalgia and speaks to the human need to express themselves, even when the space for that is no longer easily accessible. Virtual worlds harness a sense of escapism and allow us to explore our multiple selves through roleplay and character design. By inviting our multiple selves, we ward off the monetisation from larger social spaces that need us to represent as one in order to be targeted by ads. They are a much-needed antidote to our real-world situations, not to mention the Metaverse. Let's not let all ruins stay ruined, and ultimately the weird personal expression of having multiple limbs and a space to be yourself will prevail.

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