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## THE ATTRACTION OF DISHONESTY IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE

There are points in time during real interaction where we are thrown into a situation in which we have to make a decision- specifically, a decision in which we can choose to tell the truth or to not tell the truth. Before going into specifics of a situation, we can first ask ourselves the moral question of:

Is it ever right to lie?

Lying as in an intentional and conscious decision to falsify a statement. In his essay entitled *Lying* Sam Harris argues that “sincerity, authenticity, integrity, mutual understanding- these and other sources of moral wealth are destroyed the moment we deliberately misrepresent our beliefs, whether or not our lies are discovered” (Harris, 2011). He states that people lie for many reasons, but they all follow suit in a breach of trust. But even though any form of a lie is deceptive- not all forms of deception are lies. Harris poses the example of an acquaintance asking, “How are you?” as a greeting and not as a question- to which the normal response is something along the lines of “Good, and you?” or “I’m doing well!” We understand the other person’s greeting and we recognize the general response we should be giving and as such, “we may skirt the truth at such moments, but we do not deliberately manufacture falsehood” (Harris, 2011).

The question remains- “is it ever right to lie?” If it is socially acceptable and deemed right in place to

What about lies with much more serious and taxing consequences? When are the right times and/or situations to draw the line of subverting the truth? Harris explains that “the more consequential the beliefs- that is, the more a person’s well-being depends upon a correct understanding of the world- the more consequential the lie” (Harris, 2011).

But perhaps concepts such as lying, falsification, and deception are different in digital mediums. Social interaction is almost inarguably altered when mediated through digital spaces such as social networking sites like Facebook, instant chatting platforms such as Skype, or through fabricated experiences such as video games. Deceit, assuming that these all focus on some sort of interaction, is inherently different when it is filtered by and because of and through virtual spaces.

Though it’s worth asking- why would anyone need to lie on the Internet? Deceive in work that exists online? Mislead through the medium of a gamespace? Perhaps it’s because, in comparison, breaking someone’s trust seems less consequential when it is done through a digital means. Some individuals feel more comfortable in virtual space- distant and removed from the immediacy of physical and in-person confrontation. Looking towards instant messaging, a form of virtual communication, primarily text-based, in which one message is sent from a user to a recipient almost instantaneously, it’s easy to pinpoint the similarities real life conversation has with its virtual counterpart.

The convergence, a gradual change to become similar or develop something in common, of emerging technologies continues to see relevance because of its high demand. Consumers control sales- and when sales come in the demand for something increases. When

companies make goods and products or offer services it makes sense for any new good or product or service to not only have new features but to maintain and further develop the older features as well. Because of this ideology, we see the first iterations of such things taking inspiration from real life equivalents. With the development of ICQ in 1996, an instant messaging computer program developed by Israeli company Mirabilis (Israel21c), people finally had the ability to simulate the feeling of real sociability within the comfort of their own home in front of a computer screen.

However, what purpose does a simulation of a real conversation serve? And even if its purpose is separate (and thus justified) from what a real conversation serves then does it truly achieve its goal of accurately simulating it? One could make the argument that it “shrinks the size of the world” by allowing people on opposite sides of the globe the means to communication. But when mediated through a text messenger such as ICQ, another barrier is built as the two people become separated both spatially and through lack of voice. The most relevant argument is perhaps that not everyone can always meet in person, or that the instant messaging program acts as a precursor to meeting in person, which connects people through more means than just in a physical space. The very nature of the instant messaging program is deceptive in that it mimics and camouflages itself as the digital sister of real life interaction.

User interface design aims to maximize the user experience of a software or machine. With ICQ as, essentially, the birth of the instant messenger users also saw the birth of instant messenger interface, including icons and menus meant to make the navigation of ICQ

simpler, quicker, and easy to understand. But the simplification is part of what makes the system so illusory in that it cuts corners in imitating something in favor of convenience. For instance, the contact list groups all of an individual's connections in a single menu for a more easier and organized design. Even moreso, all users have access to "availability statuses," which display a "level of accessibility" to one's contacts- such as "Available," "Away," or "Offline." When people have the capability to change their status so freely they are allowed to misinform others; the system has given them powers, which deceive and distort reality in ways that aren't available to them in reality without downright lying. For many reasons, people choose to ignore others- and changing their availability status makes the confrontation about it afterwards much easier. Perhaps they were "busy" or were "away" from their keyboard when the person trying to reach them had messaged them. For whatever reason it is: why do individuals choose to disregard others when they may be free to respond to their messages? Of course it makes sense that the other person may be harassing them, spamming them, or be some other nuisance to productivity, but aside from that why are people so drawn to do so in the virtual space?

The magnetism that deception holds in the virtual space is there because it is so removed from real life consequence. It seems harder to do so within the public (digital) eye, but dishonesty carries itself on through popular networking sites such as the video-sharing platform *YouTube*. Perhaps the first case of this was the YouTube channel *Lonelygirl15*, a fictional YouTube series that follows the life of a sixteen-year-old girl named Bree Avery in the form of vlogs, or video blogs. The series was created by filmmakers Ramesh Flinders,

Miles Beckett, and Greg Goodfried and ran from June 2006 to August 2008, though the account's channel was created in May 2006. On June 16, 2006, the very first *Lonelygirl15* vlog was posted entitled *First Blog / Dorkiness Prevails*, in which Avery speaks about her favorite YouTubers and introduces herself very briefly (*Lonelygirl15, 2006*). Over time, she reveals more of her life in short, boring, yet sincere vlogs- though they seem to be far too well-developed to occur in reality. In September 2006, the creators of the *Lonelygirl* series reveal that the character and story of Bree Avery are fictitious over an online internet forum. Even after the big reveal of the hoax that is *Lonelygirl15*, the directors continue to develop the series and making it more outlandish and absurd as it goes on.

Because video blogging was still pretty much at its infancy the producers of the *Lonelygirl* series were able to utilize this unfamiliarity to their advantage. Greg Goodfried describes that the hook of the series was initially, "Is she real or is she not real?," but knew that once viewers knew that the character was fictitious that the series would no longer hold up (Goodfried, 2007). The entire show, based upon an illusionary character, had been built up and, when the lie had been broken down, continued to function as a collaborative and interactive experience. *Lonelygirl15* had diverted attention away from its falseness by forming this pseudo-game around itself. The character that people had once watched and been very intrigued by was now revealed to be artificial and, as a result of the actions of the creators, viewers were now participating in the series in a much more immersive fashion by finding flaws in the production, clues in the episodes to progress the show and help the characters, and attending live events which pertained to the survival of the series as a whole.

Because of the deeper level of immersion the audience becomes distracted and, while recognizing the whole scheme of the *Lonelygirl15* as fake, continue to feed into the lie.

Other characters have also emerged and been birthed through YouTube who, many perceive to be real at first- even in the art world. Comedian and artist Alan Resnick created an entire narrative around the YouTube channel *Alantutorial* which follows Alan, a man with infant like knowledge, as he creates confusing tutorial videos for his viewers. Over time, he gets locked out of his house and makes very specifically tutorial videos for surviving when stranded alone. Eventually, he becomes kidnapped and makes tutorial and news videos for his captors within the white room he is confined within- which eventually becomes dirtier and dirtier until he is seen breaking out of the room in his final video *tutorial* on December 12, 2014 (*alantutorial*, 2014).

For a large amount of time many of Resnick's viewers believe that this Alan character was real (just absurd) and that his videos were oddly captivating. However, at some point, it is revealed that the individual behind the whole narrative was artist Alan Resnick- but that didn't stop the progression of the story. The series is an "example of metafiction, as the story is meant to take place in reality and the medium by which the story is told is integrated into the story itself" (*Tutorialheads*, 2014). *Alantutorial* could have only lived on YouTube because of the culture and surplus of tutorial videos uploaded on that platform. Alan acts as an extremity of the "YouTube tutor" persona- embodying the traits of mediocrity, awkwardness, and bad production. The notion of meta, referring to itself or the convention of

its own genre and creation, built up the character and space and environment around the character Alan and allowed him and his story to flourish.

Through the self-referential spectacle, the structure and system of a thing is broken down and can be analyzed through different lenses. Clichés and formulas of a configuration become obvious and apparent when a work refers to itself using the very body of it. As of recent, videogames have hit a state in their existence where they can begin to refer to their own state of play. By being developed with the “meta” in mind videogames become an interesting study of the deceptive tendencies and traits that may occur when in a state of play or interaction.

When games are created and, eventually, played- who has true control: the developer? Or the player? *The Stanley Parable* is a videogame by developer Davey Wreden with the first iteration released in July 2011 and the remake being (re)released in October 2013. The player takes on the character Stanley, an office worker who presses the keyboard buttons that appear on his computer screen until the keys stop appearing; Stanley then explores his office building and finds it to be devoid of other human life.

In a smaller lens, *The Stanley Parable* is about choices, decision-making, and opportunity. In the realm of videogames, *The Stanley Parable* questions player autonomy, the role and power of the narrator, and the experience of the unknown during play. Wreden explains his first interest in developing the game was “what would happen if you could disobey the narrator” (Shacknews, 2011)? One of the very first decisions you can make while playing situates you in a room in front of two doors and the narrator speaks, “When Stanley

came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left.” The player is now free to make the decision on whether to follow the narrator and enter the door on the left, or to go against what is told and walk through the entrance on the right. The game has given the player a specific kind of freedom only applicable to videogames (specifically *The Stanley Parable*)- the option to choose between continuing the set narrative or to divert off the set path.

However, this very notion is disingenuous in that the entirety of the videogame has already been manufactured and completed. Regardless of what the game tries to fight against, all the options, the choices, the endings of the games were preset and have been mapped and set to outcomes and possibilities that Wreden has implanted into the game long before the player is posed to make a choice. Though the power of averting the initial storyline is possible, escaping a storyline that is preset within *The Stanley Parable* is impossible.

Yet still, the completed videogame is also investigated by game developer team Crows Crows Crows, in their game *Dr. Langeskov, The Tiger, and The Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist* (referred to as *Dr. Langeskov* hereafter.) Crows Crows Crows continue to work with aspects of meta-creation in mind as the game plays off of the idea that the game is not ready and that someone is already in the process of playing the game that the player has booted up. However, there is no “other” game to be played- the player ends up assisting the narrator in smoothly moving the game forward for the “current player” and, at the end of *Dr. Langeskov*, the “game” is finally ready to be played but ends abruptly and returns to the main menu.



Through an insincere plotline, the deception of the *Dr. Langeskov* is, in some way, honest. What breaking the fourth wall does in, at least most, videogames is it grounds it and brings it back to the realm of the artificial and manufactured. With many television shows and films, the audience is asked- or expected, to suspend their disbelief. On the other hand, videogames tend to give less space for that, as there is a direct physical interaction between the media and consumer. While tons of videogames do delve into immersive story telling and cinematic shots and realistic graphics, a large majority of games still primarily concern themselves with the aspect of play. Games such as *The Stanley Parable* and *Dr. Langeskov* use dishonesty to not only question the configuration of videogames but to also cement themselves as games to the player- not as the spectacle that cinema and television offers.

Deceitfulness has many attractive qualities- for some it is the subversion of attention, for others it may be that it is another form of indirectly exposing the truth. In real life many of us tend to lie or skirt the truth in tight situations if they benefit us- but the non-immediacy of the internet and separation of the users through the diffusion of the monitor or screen gives us more time to intentionally do so. Within virtual media we are drawn to different aspects of authenticity (or rather, lack thereof) than when we compare it to real life. Whether through the interface of instant messengers, online personas, or in positions of play and collaboration dishonesty may find itself working into our actions regardless. Untruthfulness, deception, and fraudulence, may all be wrong when used to harm an individual; but if used in the context of

asserting a medium, a platform, or a genre- perhaps progression and growth somewhat relies  
on it.

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