
The *Virtual Persona* as a Creative Genre on the Russian Internet

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That which holds most true in the individual is that which, most of all, appears to be to himself, this is his potential, revealed by the story that part of himself that is wholly undefined.

Paul Valéry

Only by creating a legend, a myth, can one understand man.

A.M. Remizov

Introduction

This work is dedicated to the examination of the phenomenon of *virtual'naja lichnost'* (virtual personality or persona) in Russian Internet culture.

The focal point of this investigation – the *virtual persona* as a form of creativity – can pop up unexpectedly in the context of existing investigative literature. The creative aspect of online self-representation has rarely attracted the attention of researchers. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the phenomenon of 'the virtual I (ego)' has been analysed predominantly by psychologists [Turkle 1996; Suler 1996-2005], who were more interested in psychological rather than aesthetic issues. Secondly, the majority of work dedicated to virtual identity is based on material from the English-language Internet and reflects the reality inherent within it. However the same technocultural phenomena can function and be interpreted in various ways within the framework of different cultures.

The expression, *virtual'naja lichnost'* in its wider sense, as its English counterpart 'virtual identity', is polysemantic and has a whole series of synonyms, the meanings of which only overlap to a certain degree. The primary definitions of the term are as follows: 1) an identification

in order to get into a computer system (login, user name); 2) a pseudonym used for the identification of a user on an electronic medium (user name, nickname); 3) an abstract representation of the persona used for civil, legal or other social identification (passport number, personal code, finger prints, DNA); 4) a computer programme that simulates intelligent behaviour (robot, bot); 5) an artificial intellect in conjunction with the body (android, cyborg); 6) a fictitious personality, established by a person or group of people which creates semiotic artefacts and/or which is described 'from without' (virtual character, *virtual persona*); 7) an individual, as perceived or simulated by another; in other words, images or hypostases of a personality as something different from its essence (for example, the 'I' [ego] as opposed to the 'self').

In this article the discussion will predominantly focus on the virtual personality as defined in the sixth definition (a virtual character or persona). In this definition the *virtual persona* can be characterized by the removal of opposition to truth and lies, fact and fiction, reality and unreality, materialism and idealism, which aligns it closer to the creation of art [Gorny 2003].

What place does the *virtual persona* occupy in relation to the other forms of online self-representations? Based on a classification system of strategies and procedures developed for the analysis of various forms of autobiography [Spengemann 1980], the creation of a *virtual persona* is predominantly the realization of a poetic strategy of self-invention [Gorny 2003; Gorny 2004]. It is worth noting, however, that this classification system does not encompass those forms of the *virtual persona*, when the object of the representation is

another 'I' (the most striking example being cloning). Correspondingly, the autobiographical mode should be supplemented by the biographical one, and at least one more procedure should be introduced, which can provisionally be labelled as creative modelling.

The specific character of this study lies in the historical approach to the material. The object of the research is the evolution, over the last decade, of the genre of the *virtual persona* on the Russian Internet.

Virtual Personae on the Russian Internet

Historically, virtual identities have played a slightly different role on the Russian Internet than on its English-speaking counterpart. It is notable that Western studies on Internet Art [e.g. Greene 2004] do not include virtual identities (personae) in their lists of genres, while at the same time in Russia the virtual personality is a recognized genre of web-based creativity legitimized by a corresponding category in Teneta's online literature competition [Teneta 2003].

This divergence in research focus might be explained by the combined effect of several factors. Firstly, socio-economic factors played a role (the population's low income levels, undeveloped payment systems etc.), which defined the specific nature of the operational use of Internet technology in Russia. Whereas in developed countries the Internet quickly became available to the majority of the population and developed into an everyday life extension, in Russia it remains a luxury, "an acquisition of the élite" and is used predominantly as a tool for professional activities or self-expression [Delicyn 2005].

Secondly, the temporary gulf between the dissemination of the Internet in the West and in Russia led to a divergence in technologies, in the context of which experiments in *virtual persona* modelling were initially carried out. Whereas,

in the USA and Great Britain the Internet had been accessible in academic institutions since the 1970s, in Russia it was only in 1990 that the first international telecommunications session took place, and the first more or less feasible access for users only really became available in the mid-1990s – around the same time as the appearance of → **WWW** (World Wide Web) technology, which to a significant extent superseded other earlier popular Internet protocols. This, in turn, led to a situation where the most actively used environment for the development of virtual personalities on the Russian Internet was specifically the WWW, while in the West, the problem of virtual identity was, historically, tied up with earlier, purely textual environments, such as Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs) and Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs).

This difference in technologies left its imprint on the construction and nature of *virtual personae*. The open space of the WWW did not require 'membership'; the medium in which *virtual personae* lived had become 'the whole of the Internet', and not the semi-private space of games or forums. Moreover, this allowed users to go beyond the text and to build up the *virtual persona* as a distributed multi-media object. It is worth noting that the classic Western works dedicated to virtual identity are based on textual environments and rarely touch upon the WWW. In Russia, the opposite was the norm. I have noted that Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs) – the traditional environment for the conceptualization of the *virtual persona* in Western literature – never played a significant role in Russian cyberculture. Those Russian users who went out onto the net before the advent of the WWW (the majority of whom were studying or working in the West), evinced a clear preference for political and poetic debate in Usenet groups, as opposed to participating in online adventures of the 'dungeons and dragons' kind.

Thirdly, one has to take into account the influence of a literature-centric Russian culture on the formation of *virtual personae*. Traditionally,

literature has played an unusually important part in Russian society. In conditions of authoritarian rule and weak civil institutions, public opinion has been predominantly formed by writers. In Russia, → **literature** has taken upon itself many roles, which in the West are carried out by the church, parliament, the courts and the media. One of the consequences of this situation is the attribution of great significance to the written word and the concomitant denigration of the spoken word.

This tendency has also manifested itself on the Russian Internet. MUDs, IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, chat rooms and forums are typical of a predominance of the spoken word, albeit in written form. Usenet, homepages and blogs, on the other hand, are oriented towards the rhetoric of the written word [Manin 1997]. Therefore, the Usenets, homepages and blogs, in accordance with the literature-centric nature of Russian culture, had a higher axiological status for Russian users. This underlines the historical dynamic of the technological environments used for the creation of *virtual personae* in the Russian context. The *virtual personae* first emerge in Usenet discussion groups (such as soc.culture.soviet and soc.culture.russian, SCS/SCR) and within the framework of online literary games (Bout Rimes, Hussar Club etc.), then they begin to create their own homepages, colonise guestbooks and propagate on LiveJournal and similar communicating blogs. All these are environments that are oriented towards the written word and literature. Spoken media and technologies (IRC, ICQ, Web chats and so on), are also undoubtedly used as environments for virtual amusement. However, in terms of the generation of socially significant *virtual personae*, their role has always been secondary. Thus *virtual personae* in Russia have a distinctly literary provenance.

Fourthly, there is a difference in the predominant interpretative strategies. In Western literature the *virtual persona* is often discussed within the framework of the concept of social roles [Goffman 1956] and represented as a pri-

vate case of a rational “management of identities” [boyd 2002; Pfitzmann et al. 2004]. This approach is rather different to that of the Russian Internet, where the virtual is, as a rule, an artistic project, an eruption of creative energy, a spontaneous theatrical escapade and not some calculated image-making exercise. The Russian virtual and Western virtual identities are often on different sides of the stage lights. For, as a Russian researcher has noted, “Of itself, the performance of roles is not the source of a game, but only signifies the adoption of a specific role of a programme” [Gashkova 1997, 86].

A significant amount of Western research literature is dedicated to the technical aspects of creating virtual characters, understood in terms of computer programming and robot technology. Couched within this concept, the *virtual persona* is a technical object alienated from its creator and linked with him or her in terms of cause and effect, but not spiritually. In the context of the Russian Internet, the situation is the opposite: here, *virtual persona*, as a rule, is specifically the representation of the self, it is its psychological and existential extension and not an alienated and self-sufficient mechanism (with the exception of cases of ‘experimental simulations’ where the object is ‘an alien ego’).

Your distinction between the *virtual persona* in the ‘West’ and in Russia, is, in our opinion, based on the opposition of technology and spirituality, alienation and identification, rationality and spontaneity and, as such, mirrors the stereotypes connected with the dispute between ‘Westernizers’ and → ‘Slavophiles’. Aren’t you afraid that using these stereotypes might contribute to their consolidation? [Katy Teubener / Henrike Schmidt]

I can answer with a parable. There’s a deep-rooted stereotype that it is cold in Siberia in winter. The fact that it is a stereotype doesn’t

make Siberian weather any warmer. In other words, stereotypical ideas are not necessarily inadequate: they can reflect some essential features of reality. Another thing is that stereotypes tend to disregard subtleties, to ignore exclusion and to ascribe general significance to particulars. For example, there are bears in Siberia but it is not true that they used to roam the streets. The same applies to the role of personal networks ('collectivism' + 'personalism') in Russia. Their role here is different than in the West. It is not a mental construction but a perceptible reality of daily life. The challenge is how to describe and explain them in a sensible way. I don't think that exposing them as facts of false consciousness is the most effective way to deal with the problem. [Eugene Gorny]

Virtual Personae on Usenet

One can talk about 'weak' and 'strong' forms of *virtual personae*. The former are content to restrict themselves to a pseudonym, whereas the latter create an image. The first 'strong' forms of *virtual personae* appeared on the Usenet newsgroups at the end of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s. These were fictitious characters employed as intermediate agents in the endless Usenet flame wars – online slanging matches. *Virtual personae* also began to appear in the more peaceful contexts of literary creativity.

Vulis: squealing sorcery

The most famous creator of such characters was Dmitriy Vulis, whose story has been examined in detail in an article by Julija Fridman [1998]. Vulis' creatures were multi-faceted. For example he sent messages in the name of the "Simulation

Daemon", whose signature proclaimed that "this article was written by an artificial intelligence programme" and included the phrase "better an artificial intelligence than no intelligence at all" which was particularly offensive to his opponents. As Fridman puts it:

The new Daemon, in addition to its artificial intelligence, was notable for completely non-human fantasy. It intensively and inventively spewed forth filth aimed at the opponents of its learned master; it told stories from their biographies (atrocious and atrociously private rumours), which were then illustrated in accurately executed pornographic pictures in ASCII graphics. [ibid.]

Another of Vulis' creatures was Rabbi Shlomo Rutenberg. He selected Dmitriy Pruss as the object of his attack, a Jew by nationality, a person who, according to Fridman's characterization was "a peaceful, gentle-hearted, highly educated intellectual and father of three children". Rutenberg called Pruss "a Soviet-Nazi anti-Semite" and "a renowned Jew-phobic punk from Russia", and called upon the Americans to send complaints about Pruss to his employers, which is what they assiduously proceeded to do. Pruss was not dismissed but was forbidden from using the Internet and a psychotherapist was assigned to him.

Vulis did not blanch at stealing identities. Thus, in order to compromise his opponent, Peter Vorob'ev (who was an adherent of H.P. Lovecraft and considered himself an expert in black art), Vulis and his accomplices created an e-mail account from which "the counterfeit Vorob'ev immediately began to send to all newsgroups excerpts from criminal (according to American standards) racist texts calling for genocide". At the same time the public's attention was drawn to "the racist Vorob'ev" the effect of which quickly produced repercussions: at work the real Vorob'ev was showered with complaints and his account at Panix.com was shut down by the administration.

The end of this story is revealing. Although in the virtual war Vulis and his creatures seemed to be invincible, they could not withstand a blow from the

Q: Who is Dimitri Vulis?

A: Dimitri is an XSoviet immigrant who is enrolled (or used to be enrolled) in CUNY, and who is a computer professional involved i.a. in unicode matters. The realspace Dimitri is a polite person and a devoted family head. It's cyberspace image is not nearly as nice, unfortunately.

He harasses people all over the net with the most offensive sorts of messages, and uses dirty tricks to retaliate to the people who do get offended. Among his accomplished feats is a series of articles about cat-eating dogs posted to rec.pets.cats (which caused a wave of complaints and made him lose his CUNY account); a series of porno binaries with obscene comments about his opponents posted to math-related newsgroups (he lost another academic account, at fordham.edu, after this scandal); and a series of racist articles denigrating all aspects of Romanian life and culture which used to haunt the Romanian newsgroup for years.

Of course most of his net bile is spilled over his fellow XSoviets, particularly of Jewish origin (such as Michael Verbitsky, Boris Veytsman, Vlad Rutenberg or myself, as well as all Brighton Beach together); and a lot of stuff comes out from his alleged aliases in bwalk.dm.com, aol.com and ly.harvard.edu. Some of these aliases match the names of his opponents, as I already mentioned. Sometimes not only the names but also addresses match (although paths don't). Dimitri Vulis also advertises the capabilities of his site for forging and cancelling articles. Sometimes he shrewdly comments articles of his own saying: "This article is most certainly forged, after all I spent a lot of time teaching you how to forge... but I nevertheless like this article's content".

Q: Is Pruss a Nazi?

A: It is very difficult for me to say nice things about myself; fortunately, scores of fellow netters offered me to speak out of my behalf if such a need appears. I'm relatively well known in the XSoviet newsgroups for my articles against anti-Semitism and in defence of minority rights; perhaps the facts that I am Jewish and that most of the Pruss family perished in the Holocaust are less known in the net. At least Dimitri Vulis knows it perfectly well. The more slanderous are the allegations coming from his apparent aliases, shlomo@bwalk.dm.com, alienmed@aol.com and alexplore@aol.com (see below).

The so-called "Holocaust joke" has been a topic of discussion in both the X-Soviet groups and in soc.culture.israel, and I can either address the netters to the "Don't use sci and scj to 'report antisemitism'" thread there or to send the fragments of the discussion I saved. Very briefly, my statement was `_pro_` rather than anti-Jewish;

AI Simulation Daemon: *"Hi! I'm an artificial intelligence simulation of a typical Soviet émigré."*

real world. Some colleagues of the "poor, hunted Vorob'ev" reported Vulis to the FBI. It is still unknown what happened to the corporeal Vulis – but he disappeared from the net leaving only his bad name and ill reputation behind him.

In recounting this story, Fridman [1998] draws a direct parallel between the virtual battle between Vulis and Vorob'ev and the magical struggle between the two French occultists Boullan and de Guaita at the end of the 19th century. This approach would appear to be justified: The Internet allows one to influence the thoughts, emotions and lives of people without making physical contact and at times it can be used as an instrument for 'black magic'. A classic case – described in literature – is a virtual assault in the multi-user game LambdaMOO in which a character is turned into a zombie with the help of computer software [Dibbel 1993].

Golems, zombies, homunculi, the theft of the name (and by implication the soul that is linked with that name) and other magical essences and procedures are being actualized in cyberspace with striking regularity. The popularity of occult studies among a number of active figures in the Russian Internet has added to this.

You refer to "black magic" as a phenomenon characteristic to the activities of virtual personalities. If that is a central motive in the 'texts' analyzed here, one should comment on the fascination of the (Russian?) net community for esoterics, conspiracy, occultism. Some of the virtual personalities you refer to – as those created by Vulis, or the Robot Dacjuk – are furthermore linked to openly extremist resources/ideologies. With regard to the demiurgic motive of the (de)construction of identities the proto-totalitarian impulse of such projects (based for example on Nietzsche, just to name one) should be mentioned. [Henrike Schmidt]

Teneta: Net literature and the virtual persona

Usenet was not only about “flame wars”: an active literary life was on the boil in the newsgroups. Moreover, many people preferred to publish their poetry and prose under a pseudonym and it is only one short step to go from pseudonym to virtual. In April 1995 → **Leonid Delicyn**, himself no stranger to writing, decided to collect and put into some order literary texts published in the soc.culture.soviet and soc.culture.russian (SCS/SCR) newsgroups. Thus the first Russian online literary journal DeLitZine came into being on the server of Wisconsin University, where Delicyn was, at the time, writing a dissertation on geology. In June the following year, on the basis of this journal and with the active participation of Aleksej Andreev (a mathematician and poet also studying in the USA at the time) Teneta, the online Russian literature contest was established. The organizing committee was made up of virtually all the active Russian Internet figures of the age. It is worth noting that the formation of a Russian net community came about specifically because of literature – although the majority of the participants were representatives of the natural sciences and not one of them was a professional man of letters.

Teneta quickly evolved: new categories were introduced reflecting the specific nature of net literature. Among these was the category for *virtual persona* (virtual'naja lichnost'), which boasted such sterling characters as “the virtual lover Lilja Frik” (an obvious allusion to the avant-gard poet Vladimir Majakovskij's real lover, Lilja Brik), who wrote verses, and the virtual cat Allergen, who, in addition to poetry, wrote essays on the theme of virtuality. Teneta's founders also took part in this category themselves: Aleksej Andreev as Viktor Steпноj and Mary Shelley and Leonid Delicyn as Leonid Stomakarov. This occurred when it became possible to write in the Russian language using Russian script and

when the centre of creative activity moved to the World Wide Web.



Teneta.ru: *Introducing the virtual persona as a genre.*

Virtuals on the WWW

Muxin: a virtual with a human face

The first virtual on the Russian web was Maj Ivanych Muxin (the correct English spelling of the name would be Mukhin; the traditional spelling is adopted here). If Yulis created his virtual self in the image of “a monster, a terrible beast with the forked tongue of a venomous pig” [Fridman 1998], then Muxin, according to the definition of his creator and self-perpetuating secretary was “a virtual with a human face” [N. 1998].

The public found out about “the first and last pensioner on the World Wide Web” from an interview with Muxin, published on 6 October 1995 in the Estonian Russian-language newspaper Den za Dnem [Babaev 1995]. The image of a pensioner who had been born “in Vjatka in 1917, three days before the sad events that shook the world” and who had stayed alive to see “the other revolution – the computer revolution” was not only unexpected but also realistic. The Internet in those days was very exotic and the

progressive pensioner struck the public's imagination. The reporter Mirza Babaev announced that he had communicated with Muxin via the Internet and only a short while after had met him in person. This is how Muxin's apartment was described:

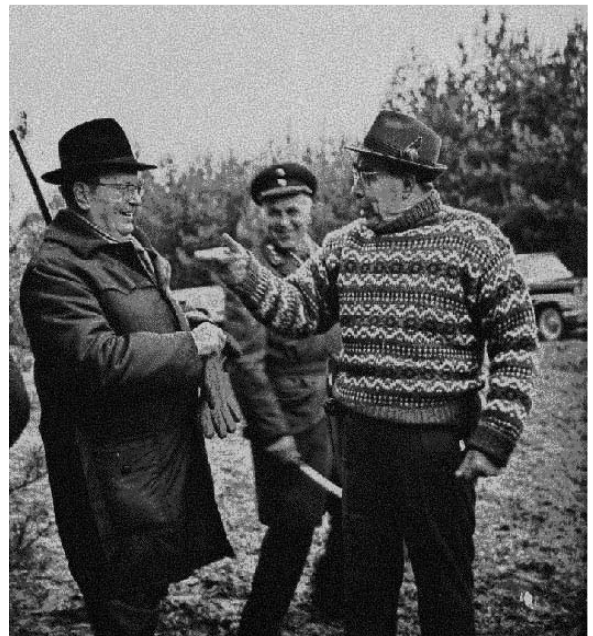
I am sitting in Maj Ivanych's place in his cosy little room in Vjajke-Kaar Street, I am drinking Ceylon tea, on the walls there are photographs of relatives and certificates of honour; on the bookshelf is a collection of Russian and foreign classics, an antique issue of *The Elocutionist*... In the stove the birth logs are crackling away merrily. And by the window on a low ancient table covered with a lace tablecloth flickers the display of a PC 486-DX. [ibid.]

In the interview Muxin narrated the story of his life, including many colourful details. He explained the basic terminology of the Internet to his readers and demonstrated how to write a hypertext document and how to insert links and images into it, taking, as an example, the verses of an old Soviet song.

The interview was a great success: it was re-printed by several Moscow magazines and translated into Estonian. It is even rumoured that Lennart Meri, then President of Estonia, made a reference to the progressive pensioner from Tartu (without, admittedly, mentioning his name) in one of his speeches about plans to increase Internet use in the country. In the second interview [Babaev 1996], Muxin added to his credibility paradoxically by including details that seemed highly unlikely. As an illustration, a photograph was published in which a smiling Maj Ivanych, in a forester's uniform, was seen with Brezhnev and Broz Tito (in the text Muxin commented on the circumstances that led to the photograph being taken). The interview was carried out by e-mail, at that time totally unprecedented (this was the first online interview published in Russian).

The plausibility of Muxin's image, created by a multitude of colourful everyday, biographical details and his inimitable style was strengthened by

his living presence on the Internet. Thus, as one of the first Russian Internet users, he created his own homepage [Muxin 1997], gave advice to beginners on how to use e-mail and wrote poetry on the online Bout Rimes game. Like a new Admiral Shishkov [writer and minister of education in early 19th Russia, promoting a 'purification' of Russian language, – *the editors*], Muxin tried to Russify foreign words and came up with amusing Russian terms for the translation of Internet realia: thus, he would translate the World Wide Web as *Povsemestno Protjanutaja Pautina* (literally, "the Universal Extended Spider's Web") and interface as *mezhdumordie* (literally, "intersnout").



Maj Ivanych Muxin: *The plausibility of the incredible.*

Muxin enjoyed both affection and respect on the Internet. In 1998 he was elected President and Honorary Chairman of the Teneta literary contest [Teneta 1998], and the Virtual Russian Library was almost named after him [Gornyj, Litvinov, Pilshnikov 2004]. It is noteworthy that Mirza Babaev, who contributed to his fame by his writings, has also been a virtual personality. There was certainly no initial indication that both Maj Ivanych

Muxin and Mirza Babaev were fabrications, fictitious people or *virtual personae* (virtually). Many users believed in their reality, while those who were aware of the mystification played the same game treating them as real personalities.

Having admitted that he was Muxin's creator, → **Roman Lejbov**, a Tartu philologist and one of the founding fathers of Russian cyberculture, announced that "he considered Maj Ivanych to be a completely real character" [N. 1998]. This comment leads to an interesting question: how are these *virtual personae* perceived by the authors who have created them? What are they and what do they signify to their authors? In other words, what is the ontology of a *virtual persona*? Is it that their creators have multiple personalities, or, in the words of Mercy Shelley [2004] are they "multi-persons" (*multipersonalny*)? Or do they relate to their *virtual personae* as something separate from themselves? It is impossible to give an unequivocal answer to this question: in many cases the author feels that the *virtual persona* is both an essential aspect of his self and something separate and independent [for analogies with literary creativity, see Gornyj 2004]. Thus, from the point of view of the authors, the *virtual persona* is simultaneously an expression and a construction, a fantasy and reality, an object of creativity and an independent subject. Its ontological status is ambivalent, as is its attitude towards its creator.

Being the first fully-fledged virtual, Muxin had a significant effect on the subsequent modelling of *virtual personae* on the Russian Internet. He provided an example which was later imitated and repulsed.

Paravozov: the spirit of the server

On 24th December 1996 "Vechernij Internet" (the Evening Internet), "a daily commentary on the Russian and world net", edited by Anton Nosik, began publication on the server of the Citiline company. Each issue consisted of hypertext,

stuffed with links, 12-20,000 characters in total (2-2,500 words). → **Nosik** wrote on a wide variety of subjects, but the Internet provided both themes and the method of writing: even subjects that were distant from the net were unfailingly illustrated with references to net resources. Vechernij Internet's popularity was extraordinary, considering the scale of the Internet at the time – and on average, each issue was read by 2,000 people daily.

The following year was marked by a boom in web commentaries (*web-obozrenija*). This genre included reviews of websites, computer advice, commentaries and musings on various subjects through the prism of the net. A list called "All Commentators", compiled by Aleksandr Romadanov [Aleksroma 1997-1998], consisted of 80 or so web commentaries – an amazing figure for the Russian Internet, still in relative infancy. Essentially, these regular columns were the first Russian blogs. However, unlike the blogs of the next millennium, their theme was not life and commentaries on it but the net and what was happening on it. The virtuality of the commentaries' subject matter led to the virtualization of their authors. The first web commentator to demonstratively don the mask of a *virtual persona* was Ivan Zrych Paravozov, with his column "Paravozov-News" [1999].

Paravozov was invented by Aleksandr Gagin, who worked, at the time, as a systems analyst at Jet Infosystems. He started posting his comments on the net, which were an explosive "mix of lyrical writings, aphorisms and puns for all sorts of occasions" [Gornyj, Sherman 1999-2] even before the launch of Vechernij Internet in November 1996. Paravozov's innovation was his very image: he renounced human form and declared himself a "spirit of the server". This *persona* was causally linked to the author, but at the same time it demonstrated a significant level of autonomy. Sometimes Paravozov argued with Gagin; in this respect, one episode involving Paravozov during an IRC-conference is revealing [Paravozov 1997]:

Presenter [asks a question from “solntse”]: So, are you or are you not Gagin?

Paravozov [to solntse]: Of course I’m not Gagin, I’ve already discussed this.

gagin [to solntse]: I write Paravozov.

Paravozov [to Gagin]: You liar, what do you have to do with it? Stop sucking up. Next you’ll be saying you’re Kadetkina and Anikeev [another *virtual personae*, well-known on the Russian Internet at that time – E.G.].

Gagin explained the appearance of Paravozov by both his tendency to systematize real phenomena [see r_1 2004], and by an emotional outburst brought on by an argument among Zhurnal.ru’s authors about how to write about the Internet. (It is also from this, from the abbreviation ZR, that his patronymic Zrych comes). The choice of the genre of *virtual persona* was influenced by another, unspoken factor: the desire to hide behind a mask to avoid problems at work: Jet Infosystems, where Gagin worked, would not have approved of his net activities.



Gagin and Paravozov: Like looking into a mirror.

Using the example of Paravozov, one can observe how innovation in the genre developed. Two processes, well known to sociologists and anthropologists, played a leading role here: imitation, facilitating the continuity of culture [Tarde 1895], and emulation, rivalry, the desire to surpass one’s contemporaries, being a powerful motive for creativity and responding to the appearance of “cultural configurations” [Kroeber 1944] – constellations of creative people during a spe-

cific period. On the one hand, Paravozov joined in the game initiated by Zhurnal.ru; on the other, he set himself against it, choosing, he believed, an alternative strategy.

It is curious that Gagin’s own style is so different from that of Paravozov and that Gagin the journalist has never attained the popularity of the *virtual persona* he created. What is more, Gagin treats Paravozov’s work as if it was not himself doing the writing it: “Looking at these texts today, I don’t understand why they are the way they are, and I don’t recognise the person who wrote them.” [c.f. r_1 2004]

Katja Detkina: a girl with a passport

From the outset, Paravozov’s personality laid no claim to authenticity and needed to be treated as a game. Soon, however, a persona appeared on the Russian net whom many people believed to be genuine. This was Katja Detkina, whose virtual life and death stunned the Russian Internet. Briefly, this is her story:

16th February [1997]. The exposure of Katja Detkina is the first major scandal on the Russian net. An article appeared in the electronic journal, CrazyWeb, in which it was stated that the real author of “KaDetkina’s Observations” (Detkina 1997), the sarcastic “obziraniya [an untranslatable neologism derived from *obozrevat*, ‘to observe’ or ‘to comment’ and *obsirat*, obscene, to ‘shit upon’ or ‘defame’ – E.G.] of the Russian Internet”, which have been coming out since the beginning of the year, was Artemij Lebedev. The authors stated that KaDetkina’s writings contained, “material which is slanderous and insulting to specific companies and individuals” and that Lebedev, who had so crudely “gone for” his rivals should take responsibility, even criminal responsibility. [...] On 3rd March [1997] it was announced that Katja Detkina had died tragically in a car accident. This news produced a stormy reaction among the net public – the virtuality of this persona was not obvious to everybody. [Gornjy 2000-1]

Stylistically, Katja Detkina looked to two contemporaries, both of whom wrote Internet commentaries – Muxin and Paravozov. But neither of them completely suited her. Her strategy was to take the best from them – “the design structure

of a website” from the first, and “literacy and memories of better times”, from the second. It was understood that she would write in her own way and on her own themes.

The illusion of reality was strengthened by convincing biographical details, photos of her passport (which she published as a proof of her reality) and a recognizable style.



Katja Detkina: *The illusion of reality.*

Having analyzed Detkina’s style posthumously, Zhitinskij [1997] came to the conclusion that → **Lebedev** was her author: “the style of Kadetkina and the style of Tema [Lebedev] are a single style”. However, Lebedev only admitted that he was the author much later. In a private conversation in 2005, he stated that one of the factors that prompted him to create Katja was dissatisfaction with existing web commentaries, not one of which, in his opinion, looked at websites from a professional point of view:

Her task was to compensate for the shortage of ‘trade’ texts. Nosik wrote about politics and Gagin about interesting sites. Kadetkina began to put into practice my idea about the Wall Street Journal – a publication which looks at the world, taking into account the existence at companies of owners and people responsible for events of various kinds.

The result of these attempts, was, as seen previously, completely different: the *virtual persona* Lebedev created ‘with professional intentions’

acquired a life of its own, and her ‘virtual life and death’ put before the net community a mass of philosophical and moral dilemmas.

Isn’t the case of Katja Detkina exactly the sort of “calculated image-making exercise” – rather than “an eruption of creative energy, a spontaneous theatrical escapade” – that you attributed to *virtual personae* of Western origin? [Katy Teubener / Henrike Schmidt]

Retrospectively, it transpired that web commentators, Katja’s closest contemporaries (whom she set herself against), were not the only ones she could be compared with. Discussing the Detkina phenomenon, the Kiev philosopher Sergej Dacjuk likened her to the wandering mountebanks (*skomorokhi*) of old Russia and indicated parallels in the history of Russian literature [Dacjuk 1997-1]: “Barkov [a notorious 18th century author of obscene poems – E.G.] is Katja Detkina’s predecessor. Pushkin and Lermontov are her prototypes”. The meaning of ‘the case of Detkina’, in Dacjuk’s opinion, goes way beyond the bounds of the Internet. According to Dacjuk’s conception, Katja died because “she was the first to call a shit a shit”. She did so in a stylistically brilliant way, and as a result was persecuted by Internet ‘society’ for her bravery and talent.

Another conception interpreted the events in more prosaic terms, as a struggle for influence and money. In this version, Lebedev, hiding behind the mask of a *virtual persona*, intentionally ridiculed his competitors in the field of setting up websites to order. His competitors (Altukhov and Kolcov) took offence, started to rip off the mask and tried to hold him to account. Lebedev, seemingly fearing the unpleasantness that threatened him, made an unexpected move and killed his *persona*. When the truth about his authorship was revealed, many people took offence, thinking they had been taken for a ride. But the character he had created proved so strong that public opinion turned against his op-

ponents as well, who were blamed for the death of a young and delicate girl, albeit imaginary.

The first interpretation exploits the traditional counterposing of genius and the masses; the second portrays the case as a war of corporations in which both sides use underhand tactics.

Another, discursive, approach is possible, though, in which the participants in the conflict express impersonal, rambling strategies and their underlying ideologies. Detkina's rhetoric turned out, in a sense, to be a return to the morals of Usenet, where refined abuse, which inevitably became personal, was the normal way to conduct a discussion. But on this occasion, however, no discussion was able to take place. First of all, unlike Usenet newsgroups, the web, with its columns and homepages, did not allow opponents to meet 'face to face'. Secondly, the two entities were ordered by different rule sets. Two ideologies clashed, two notions of freedom and responsibility. The first notion looked to the *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*; the second to the criminal code. The first originated in the concept of the net as a space of unlimited freedom of self-expression, not governed by the laws of the 'old world'; the second equated words with deeds and demanded accountability for 'slander and insult', before a worldly court. The clash of discourses and the worldviews that stood behind them led to the conflict being turned into an ethical problem, which was recognized even before the tragic climax [Gornyj, Ickovich 1997].

News of the Katja Detkina's death shocked the Russian net community. Despite all the revelations, many people refused to believe in her virtuality, right to the end. Death was too serious a subject for them to suspect it was a joke. In the guestbook of "KaDetkina's Observations", on the Kulichki site, virtual tears were shed, obituaries and poems dedicated to Katja were written (records of this have unfortunately not survived). The 'killing' of Detkina by her creator and the dynamics of the public reaction to her death have raised a whole range of questions, which no-one previously had reason to think about. What are the allowable lim-

its of net mystification, beyond which, games and jokes become deceit and manipulation? Is it ethical to kill a virtual? What is the ontological nature of a *virtual persona* – how does it differ from a real person, on the one hand, and a literary character on the other?

Nosik, emphasizing the unreality of Detkina, compared her to a literary character (Turgenev's Mumu) and made sarcastic observations about the over-serious attitude to her death [Nosik 1997-1]. He was seconded by Artemij Lebedev, who referred to the fictitious nature of the characters created by his forefather, Lev Tolstoj and refused to take responsibility for the "fruit of someone's imagination" [c.f. Zhitinskij 1997]. These arguments did not convince the writer, → **Aleksandr Zhitinskij**. He pointed out an important difference: while a literary character was by default imaginary, then the level of reality of a *virtual persona* was not clear – a *virtual persona* could quite easily turn out to be real. Hence, the difference in reactions to what happens to it. He agreed with the 'people's opinion', voiced in Detkina's guestbook – "You can't joke about such things!" – and explained why he believed the story of her death was amoral:

If there is a real Ekaterina Albertovna Detkina, then in any case she has been badly treated – in the case of a real death by the fact that it has been turned into a farce; in the case of a hoax, by the hoax itself. Why bury someone alive? [...] The unethicity is in the poor treatment of a real person – if that person exists. If it doesn't, then what is ugly is the fact that having earned the trust of some of the public, it has been forced to cry over a fantasy (and here it's not a case of "I'll shed tears over a fantasy" – it's not those sort of tears). [ibid.]

A *virtual persona*, according to Zhitinskij, occupies a middle ground between a real person and a fantasy character; the closeness to either of these poles depends on how convincing it is. Detkina's author was unethical, according to Zhitinskij, in the way that he made her too convincing and, in this way, misled the public. By passing off an illusion as reality, he used his created character to manipulate the

consciousness of the auditorium to elicit the reactions he needed. The line between art and social engineering turned out to be blurred.

Detkina, like Muxin, Babaev and Paravozov before her, whose experiences she rejected, became a model for imitation – both in respect of the form and style of net creativity, and in respect of principles for constructing a character. Imitators appeared: for example, a certain Kotja Detkin, who claimed to be Katja Detkina’s brother and wrote web commentaries under the title “Kodekada”. But her influence was wider than that: later generations of virtuals, by using her experience, were able to create something new.

Mary Shelley: Reflection on the nature of virtuality

In October 1997 a certain “Hog” (*khryjak*) appeared in the guestbook of the Vechernij Internet. It amazed the reader with its energy, wit and extraordinarily obscene style. This was a ‘pen test’ – the first phase of the creation of a new virtual. Soon afterwards, Sergej Dacjuk stated [1997-2]: “The style and direction of Katja Detkina has, this week, been given an unexpected continuation. This is a newcomer to RuNet – Mary Shelley, writing in the genre of a sarcastic mockery [steb].”

The productivity and variety of genres in Mary’s creative work were tremendous. A complete list of her works and references to critical reaction can be found on her homepage [Shelley 1997]. Mary’s witty comments on what was happening on the Russian net were supplemented by her self-reflections: in the article *Is it easy to be virtual?* [Shelley 1998] she discussed the nature of virtuality and gave practical advice to creators of virtuals. This article became part of her novel *Pautina* (The Web) [Shelley 2002] – “the first novel about Russian Internet – how can we describe it? – life” [Kuricyн 1999], “the first novel about the Internet written by a virtual character” [Frei 1999], “a theory-novel of virtual literature” [Adamovich

2000]. The novel was a futurologist reflection on the computerized world and contained numerous references and allusions to the phenomena and personalities of the Russian Internet. Shelley’s next novel, *2048* had no such references [Shelley 2004].

Asked about the origins of Mary Shelley’s *persona*, Aleksej (Lexa) → **Andreev**, who admitted to being the creator, pointed out that the *persona* was constructed by contrast [in Shepovalov 2002]. First of all, Shelley’s style dated back to Usenet, “where everyone swore”, in contrast to the “rudimentary RuNet”, “where everyone is friendly and fusses around”. Secondly, “the image of this sprightly but educated girl without complexes” contrasted with the predominance of men on the Internet at the time.



Mary Shelley: “*Is it easy to be virtual?*”

The meaning of the literary associations in the choice of name is evident: the historical Mary

Shelley was the author of the novel, *Frankenstein*, which describes an artificially created living being – a prototype of future cyborgs (and virtuals). With the help of the metonymical transfer of meaning, the new Mary Shelley became a virtual, fabricated personality, while her actual creator took the role of Frankenstein: the author and the character changed places.

The new Mary Shelley wrote short stories, articles and plays, devised web projects, put on radio plays, wrote columns and gave interviews. Her pen (or rather her keyboard) belongs to the *Manifesto of Anti-grammaticality* [Shelley n.d.], which became the theoretical basis of the activity of so-called → *padonki* (distorted *podonki* – scum, bastards) and their Internet mouthpiece at the time – the website Fuck.ru and its later incarnations such as Udaff.com and Padonki.org. The main characteristics of *padonki*'s slang include the use of obscene words, deliberately erroneous spelling (erratives) and specific speech formulas. By 2005, the slang infected Russian LiveJournal (*Zhivoj Zhurnal*) and acquired a non-official status of the 'language of ZhZh' [see about the *padonki* movement as well Gusejnov 2005; Vernidub 2005].

In 1998 she came first in the Teneta contest, in the *virtual persona* category. At the awards ceremony Mary came forward in the form of a real girl with an attractive décolletage which led to some lively commentaries in the web media. The personality of Mary's 'boyfriend', Percy Shelley, was not developed sufficiently, but these two names merged with the publication in print of the two novels mentioned, of which "Mercy" Shelley figures as an author.

Her wit and sharpness of style provided a basis for comparing Shelley and Detkina. However, the similarity ends here. In contrast with Katja, Mary never claimed to be real (in this she is closer to Paravozov): the biographical details she gave had a decided air of parody about them. Her image required people to treat her playfully, and the diversity of genres in her work and use of various media brought her closer to Muxin and Babaev. Her ex-

ample of self-reflection became a leading motif of the next generation of virtuals.

However, her closest peers, as often happens, preferred not to compete with her but to take the opposite direction. The virtual that appeared several months after Mary Shelley had practically nothing in common with her. Instead, the creator of the new *virtual persona* reproduced devices familiar from the work of Vulis but on an even greater scale.

Robot Dacjuk: the de-personalization of the author

In December 1997 Andrej Chernov and Egorij Prostospichkin [2002] started a project called "Robot Sergej Dacjuk™" (RoSD™). It consisted of a text generator and supplementary commentaries. The initial material was the work of the Kievan philosopher and journalist, Sergej Dacjuk, quoted above. Chernov's personal dislike of Dacjuk's texts, which he found pompous, empty and badly written, served as the motivation for his creation of the generator. However, as Sergej Kuznecov [2004, 198] pointed out, having devoted several articles to this story, "the project gradually went well beyond a joke, and RoSD™ acquired the characteristics of an esoteric order and any texts, whenever they were written, started to be ascribed to the Robot himself". The task of Chernov, an adherent of Aleister Crowley, who had set himself up as a black magician, was the virtual destruction of the real Dacjuk, his replacement by a robot and his ousting from cyberspace. In order to achieve this goal he took vigorous action: creating branches and subdivisions of RoSD™ on various sites and actively contaminating all sorts of guestbooks in the name of the virtual Dacjuk and even faking the real Dacjuk's homepage.

Anton Nosik pointed to English-language prototypes of The Robot Dacjuk – Scott Pankin's automatic complaints generator and the Virtual Cyrano Server (a generator of love and farewell letters)

and estimated the technical quality of the Robot as far from being perfect [Nosik 1997-2]. In a few days, answering to the alarmed Dacjuk's message about Prostospichkin's activity who announced a vacancy of the editorial position of Dacjuk's Cultural provocations website, Nosik furthermore demonstrated clearly that Prostospichkin was himself a robot-generator and that Dacjuk thus has tilted windmills [Nosik 1997-3].



Sergej Dacjuk: *Virtual destruction of a real person.*

Sergej Dacjuk devoted several articles to the analysis of the case of the robot named after him [Dacjuk 1998-1, 1998-2]. In the article *Interactive de-personalization of the author* he saw in the robot's activities a manifestation of Internet-wide tendencies:

The question could be put thus: is it ethical or unethical (moral or amoral) to deprive an Internet author of his rights to published works on the Internet via his de-personalization. However, it is the old notions of ethics or morals in particular which lose their meaning here. The diversified de-personalization of authorship, carried out by my opposite, is largely what THE INTERNET IS DOING WITH AUTHORSHIP IN GENERAL. [...] The performative paradox of interactive authorship on the net is a mainstream process of the de-personalization of ideas, thoughts, texts – it is a step into the virtual reality of meanings. [Dacjuk 1998-2]

At the same time he noted that the activity of the robot is not constructive because it does not give rise to any new meanings – on the contrary, it blocks out the meanings with irrelevant noise. In that he was correct. It seems that his mistake was that he

took the robot too seriously, entered into a dialogue with it and ultimately agreed to his own destruction as an author, justifying this with philosophical considerations about “the nature of Internet authorship”. Unlike Vulis' victims, he did not start writing complaints but accepted his own fate almost without resistance. As a result the text generator defeated the person: Dacjuk practically disappeared from the Internet, stopped writing on Internet-related topics and re-qualified himself as a political analyst.

Dialogue forms: forums and guestbooks

But it may not have been just the robot. The Russian net itself was changing rapidly. The growth of the Internet soon made it boundless, and the improvement in search engines devalued the manual work of describing and assessing sites. By the end of 1997 the genre of web reviews began to diminish; in 1998 it had faded out completely, and in the spring of 1999 Vechernij Internet (subsequent irregular issues aside) ceased publication. The Russian Internet entered a new phase of its development.

First of all, there was a shift from monologue to dialogue forms: interactive forms of web communication such as forums and guestbooks came to the forefront. This, on the one hand stimulated the development of public discussions and of new forms of net literature, and, on the other hand, it generated the problem of the relationship between static and dynamic forms of electronic publication [Gornyj 1999].

Guestbooks were flooded with anonymous contributors and virtuals. Sometimes this gave rise to interesting forms of collective creation, but more often than not the invisibility and unidentifiability of the authors facilitated psychological repression: freedom from the limitations of the 'real world' degenerated into the freedom to be insulting. The Usenet flame wars were reincarnated in a new but related medium of web forums. *Virtual personae* contributed to this proc-

ess. As Dmitrij Bavilskij noted, discussing forums on the Russian Journal, “the degree of emotionality (vulgarity) of those who write on a forum is in direct proportion to the degree of their virtuality” [Bavilskij 2002]. The positive aspects of virtuality were notable in web-based role-playing and literary games where virtual masks were used for fun and creativity, rather than as a means of evading responsibility as was the case with forums.

The second feature of the post-web-reviewer period was the raising of the standard of reflection and self-reflection. Apart from questions of virtualization, at the centre of attention were problems of the ontological and epistemological nature of self, self-identification mechanisms, the construction of the ‘I’ and ‘others’. Or, to adopt the taxonomy of autobiographical forms [Spengemann 1980], there was a shift from self-expression and self-invention to self-scrutiny.

Namnijaz Ashuratova: systems of self-identification

An obvious example of this shift was Namnijaz Ashuratova – a conceptual web-artist and virtual personality of the new generation. In her projects she graphically demonstrated the mechanisms of the formation of stereotypes of thinking and subjected them to fierce → **criticism**. The project, “System of self-identification” is described thus:

The visitor is given the option of creating a composition of symbols, which determine his or her uniqueness. An international identificational jury examines this data and gives each visitor an assessment (index of identification). The principles of assessment are not known and, generally speaking, they can change every now and then. Perhaps the behaviour of the jury is governed by such principles as political correctness or ethnic hatred – who knows? [Ashuratova 1999]

The limitations of choice with a pre-set list of symbols of mass culture, the Kafkaesque unknown nature of the criteria used by the “international jury” and strange classifications (thus, gender is

represented by the following variations: male, female, unisex, → **gender**, macho, feminist) both undermined the idea of uniqueness and forced each visitor to think about the mechanisms for the construction of the self. Within the taxonomy of forms of *virtual persona* used in this text, this approach can be described as analytical modelling, by which the object of the modelling is the subjectivity of members of the auditorium, exposed as an imaginary construction.

Another project of Ashuratova’s, the “Enemy Processing System” [1999-2002], allowed the user to choose an object of hate, represented by a generalized term (“Russian”, “woman”, “poofter”, “capitalist”, “hacker”, “me” etc.) and a photograph of the person representing this concept. According to the results of the poll, which went on for three years, the most popular objects of hate were “American”, “priest”, “whore”, “communist”, “Jew” and “Chechen”. Not only the stereotypes of those who took part but the very principle of the poll itself was subjected to ridicule.



Enemy Gallery: Choose an object of hate.

As with her other projects, Namnijaz worked not with real things but with their projections (which is a common trait of conceptual art). At the same time, the criteria of choice and assessments were not completely clear and the possibility of arbitrary falsifications remained. As Sergej Kuzne-

cov [2000] pointed out, “Namnijaz Ashuratova’s project lays bare the absurdity of most online polls, their unrepresentativeness and fundamental uninterpretability”. But a wider interpretation is also possible, implying the establishment of the futility of any polls or elections.

The emphatically hard-hitting art projects by Namnijaz Ashuratova were successful and won several prizes. Soon the author of Ashuratova revealed himself. It was the media-artist Andrej Velikanov. A dialogue was published between Velikanov and Ashuratova [n.d.], where they argued in a similar manner to that of Gagin with Paravozov, and Muxin with Lejbov. Thus, Velikanov declared that one of his reasons for setting up a virtual hypostasis was the desire to be able to take part in festivals and competitions under another name (to which Ashuratova laconically replied: “You pig!”). On the other hand, Velikanov admitted that he was oppressed “not only by the presence of a [his] physical body but also by belonging to a particular gender and ethnicity”. From this came the creation of a bodiless virtual and a radical change of identifying features. In the dialogue the already familiar motif of an autonomous *persona* strengthening over time can be heard: gradually Namnijaz transformed into an “independent creative unit”.

Namnijaz’s political incorrectness, growing “into misanthropy in menstrual periods”, links her with Katja Detkina; her name identifying her as “a person of Caucasian ethnicity” [a term used to describe non-Russian peoples on the country’s southern borders such as Azerbaijanis, Chechens, etc.- E.G.] with Mirza Babaev; and the use of software for self-modelling with Robot Dacjuk. Reflection on virtuality brings her closer to Mary Shelley, but now, not only virtual but any personality proves to be constructed.

Eugene Gorny: Self-knowledge

Myself aimed to contribute towards the development of “virtual reflexivity” with mainly three

projects, which applied the concept of virtuality to the self of the author rather than to an artificially created person (as in the case of Mary Shelley) or to ‘man in general’ (like Ashuratova). In the first case, the self was constructed from quotes found online which described the author from the outside [Gornyj 2000-2]; in the second, from quotes the author extracted from different sources such as books [Gornyj 2001-1]; in the third – from descriptions of subjective experiences of situations in which the external and internal combined as one [Gornyj 2003]. Thus, various theories of the self were tested empirically: the constructivist (the personality as a sum of social roles and external reactions to its manifestation); → **post-modernist** (the personality as a collection of fragments of the discourse practices of other people); and the psychedelic/symbolic (the personality as the manifestation of deep experience). The aim of these experiments was to understand ‘what actually is’, i.e. self-knowledge in the broad sense – perhaps even leading to the idea that no self in the absolute sense exists or, to put it another way, that any self is relatively real.

Crisis of genre

On the 1st April 1998 *The Exposure of Ivan Kapustin* [Kapustin 1998] was published on “Russian lace”. Its basic idea was that “there are practically no people in cyberspace”. Listing the figures of the Russian Internet one after another (the article is something of a personological compendium), the author revealed the virtual essence of each individual personality in succession.

This parody of conspirological research is an apposite illustration of the theory about the indeterminate status of the *virtual persona*: a virtual, i.e. someone’s presence on the net as a personality, is determined by their having a name; the author who remains beyond the bounds of the net is essentially anonymous; this means that the author of a virtual could be anyone. Conse-

quently, there could be one author for all of them (as Kapustin, himself a *virtual persona*, ultimately argued).

There is an unexpected parallel to *The Exposure of Kapustin* in Muxin's response to "Infocracy" [Gornyj, Sherman 1999-1] – a collection of biographies of Russian Internet figures:

[...] a good half of the list of 'best people' raises all sorts of doubts on the issue of existence in so-called reality. Read, for example, the biography of the first and last personalities on the list – Verbickij and Chernov. Take note – the first and last. Alpha and Omega! A game of pure reason. [c.f. Lejbov 1999]

The text is undoubtedly ironic: the genuine existence of well-known Internet personalities is called into question by a *virtual persona* who claims to be more real than them because of its greater artistic cogence. The aesthetic criterion (verisimilitude) is also a criterion of reality.

By the end of the 20th century the *virtual persona* as a creative form lost its former popularity on the Russian Internet. The previously created virtuals were exhausting their functions: "the departure from the scene of Katja Detkina, Ivan Paravozov, Mirza Babaev, Linda Gad and many other 'masks' indicates that their creators had not only deconstructed their personalities but also successfully reconstructed them back" [Andreev 2002]. Of course, *virtual personae* continued to be created but now as a degenerate form on the periphery of Internet culture. Virtuals ceased to 'make weather' on the Russian net and turned into a regular technical means of hiding one's real identity, employed by the mass user. 'The great era of virtuality', it seemed, was gone for good. But then, the LiveJournal came along.

Virtuals on the LiveJournal

"I've created two virtuals. I'm in five communities," says altimate [2004]. "I had several virtuals, which no longer exist, and I have several

'friends', who are believed to be my virtuals, although in fact they aren't," responds moon_lady [2004]. "I've created a virtual who doesn't write anything," complains e_neo [2003]. "I'll create some virtuals and then banish them in especially perverted ways," dreams bes [2005]. "I created a hundred virtuals and made a community for them!" – gushes esterita [n.d.]. ligreego [2004] succinctly explains what virtuals are and why they are necessary:

It's when you start to acquire a dual (triple, quadruple) personality, and you set up, for example one (2,3,4) more LiveJournals. You call yourself Masha, work out everything about her from biographical details right down to the colour of her knickers. And you start thinking and writing as she would. For what purpose? Because then you can demonstrate various sides of your "I"; one virtual draws while another sings.

Another of the frequent reasons given for the creation of virtuals is the impossibility of being sincere in the public/community environs of the Russian LiveJournal. The writer, Zhitinskij, exclaimed:

Three-quarters of what comes into my head I can't allow myself to write in LiveJournal because of the "disparity" of age and position, unworthiness, shameful-ness, wife, children, unsuitability, stupidity, total idiocy, pity for people and contempt for myself. What's left is what is quite unnecessary to write. [maccolite 2003]

In response, well-wishers advised him to "set up a virtual or write in private".

But virtuals are not always harmless. "User rykov set up several virtuals, which write various filth in my name in comments," said another_kashin [2005]. "One virtual takes the piss out of the entire ru_designer community," rants alex_and_r [2004]. An explosion of public anger was brought about when one popular user took revenge on another user by spreading rumours on the LiveJournal about the death of the other user's daughter.

Identity theft is also common. In the majority of cases, clones are created, i.e. users whose names are similar to that of the clone, to which is usually added the use of the userpic and imitation of

the 'original's' style. A clone can have its journal or leave comments in other journals, confusing readers who, out of inattentiveness, identify the clone with the original author. A clone can be used for some innocent fun, but equally as a powerful weapon in a virtual war.

Misha (Mikhail) Verbickij, a mathematician and web publicist, was an active participant in Usenet, a gatherer of various online archives and an editor of extremist web publications, such as The End of the World News [EOWN], The North [Sever] and the "anti-culturological weekly :Lenin:" [2002]. → **Verbickij's** creations are distinguished by their stylistic monotony, fixations on images of 'the lower part of the body', unprintable obscenities, calls for violence and murder, the use of pornographic pictures and his own abstract drawings as illustrations, and text graphic features.

The formal model of Verbickij's discourse is simple and easy to imitate. However, the problem is that it is difficult to tell the parody from an original, which is a parody in itself.

The stereotyped reproduction of the same set of reactions, ideas, quotations and stylistic methods gave grounds to speak about the transformation of Verbickij the man into 'Robot Verbickij' (by analogy with Robot Dacjuk) a long time before the appearance of LiveJournal [Nechaev n.d.]. In LiveJournal, however, this metaphor was put into effect: a clone of Verbickij (tipharet) appeared with a user name which differed from the original by only one letter (tiphareth). The clone's journal combines, in random order, quotes from the original's journal and presents its hyper-realistic imitation.

Historians are people too... When I fuck you I tell you the story [in English – E.G.]. Kill kill kill Shit and soil. Execute and resurrect. And again execute. Basically until one journalist, one deputy, banker, DJ is killed every day – Russia will not be great. [tipharet, 10.01.2005, currently unavailable]

Verbickij's journal (along with some other, extremist, web journals) was shut down by the administration of LiveJournal in June 2005 following

an online flashmob "Kill NATO". This provoked an ardent discussion about the limits of freedom of speech and the flow-out of some Russian LiveJournal users to other blogging services.

The second case is the cloning of r_l. It is under this user name that → **Roman Lejbov**, the Tartu literary critic and writer, one of the pioneers of the Russian Internet and, 'founding father of LiveJournal' is known in LiveJournal and beyond. In July 2004 a user set up a series of diaries with similar user names (r_l, r_l, r_l etc.), took as a userpic, Lejbov's own self-portrait, and started to post, in Lejbov's name, insulting comments and other journals, using quotes from Lejbov himself (who did not always steer clear of Usenet style) [rualev 2004]. Soon, the fake was exposed. Some users came to Lejbov's defence, others gloated. Lejbov was advised to ask the Abuse Team for support but he acted differently: he ended his diary for a while and then made it "friends only". Like Dacjuk and unlike Vorob'ev before him, he chose not to complain. Theoretically speaking, one should note that clones as a variety of *virtual personae* are the realization of the procedure for modelling someone else's self by means of copying. However, the precision of this copying and its functions can vary. In the case described above, the copying was selective (only obscenities were chosen from the whole body of text), and had a mostly parodying function. Despite the successful deactivation of the clones, Lejbov did not go back to the public: the spectre did its job, forcing a real person to retreat into the shadows.

Sometimes, though, things are different. For example, the administration of LiveJournal closed the account of the user, fuga, who wrote a diary in the name of the aforementioned Aleksej (Lexa) Andreev. The closure was carried out at the request of Andreev, "in which he demonstrated that the diary was a falsification by extraneous persons, who were using his name and material from surveys in Time O'Clock (TOK) without authorization" [Anisimov 2002]. It is worth noting that Andreev compared the LiveJournal virtuals

with the *virtual personae* of the early Russian web, giving distinct preference to the latter:

What happened to me was neither the first nor the last case. I saw how people were using other people's names and photos... There are diaries of Lenin, Putin etc. But I haven't yet seen any genuinely interesting virtual personalities on LiveJournal, as the first RuNet virtuals were, like Katja Detkina. [ibid.]

Another point worth mentioning in the context of the LiveJournal is the phenomenon of de-virtualization – meetings 'in reality' of users who know each other only via the Internet. The traditional place for such meetings of Moscow LiveJournalists is the O.G.I. club founded by Dmitrij Ickovich, and other similar establishments, such as the related chain of Pirogi cafes and the Bilingua club.

Which virtual personalities are the most popular in LiveJournal? A brief analysis shows that they are either those who write well or those that are well described. It is not surprising that the virtual personalities with the most friends and subscribers in LiveJournal are professional writers: Sergej Lukjanenko (doctor_livsy, 4,779 friends), Dmitrij Gorchev (dimkin, 4,685 friends), Alex Exler (exler, 3,604 friends), Max Frei (chingizid, 3,392 friends) (data of 4 August 2005). Nevertheless, well-made virtuals whose characters are completely different from their authors (i.e. virtuals in the strict sense of the word) are able to compete with them successfully. One example is the diary of Skotina Nenuzhnaja (useless bastard; username skotina) [2005], whose character was an evil-minded cat that used the catchphrase "I've pissed under the chair. Great!", which acquired the status of a LiveJournal saying. Skotina's creative world dried up quite quickly and in September 2004 the diary formally ceased to exist. Nevertheless, Skotina still had 1,755 subscribers half a year later and the diary remained one of the most popular in the LiveJournal, with more readers than Nosik, Zhitinskij, Lejbov.

An equally important factor is that of recognition, or whether the personality being created is well-known. There is a separate category in Live-

Journal for *virtual personae* that imitate the famous. At one time Aleksandr Pushkin was publishing two of his poems per day (one in the morning, one in the evening) on LiveJournal [pushkin 2002]; émigré writer Vladimir Nabokov appeared briefly, writing sometimes in Russian and sometimes in English [nabokov 2005]; financial speculator and philanthropist George Soros shared his views about life [soros 2003]; the disgraced oligarch, Mikhail Khodorkovskij posted reports from his prison cell [khodorkovsky 2005] and (of course) Vladimir Putin was there too, albeit in the form of an RSS feed translation, but in several versions at once: as Vladimir Vladimirovich™ [Mr. Parker 2005] and as Resident Utin [Group of comrades 2005].

The cloning of popular LiveJournal users could be seen as a private case of impersonation of famous people. In both cases, the procedure of modelling is used, but if in the case of clones it takes the form of copying, with famous people it takes the form of recreation of the model. The last of these could also occur among LiveJournal users as well. For example the remake of Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* [buzhbumrl-yastik 2005], which takes place in the present and whose characters are popular members of LiveJournal. However, to quote the well-known axiom, "nothing is new under the moon": both re-writing classics and the introduction of Internet figures (including virtual ones) into creative literary works is, one might say, an established practice. An example of the former is the *Margarita and Master* project by Aleksandr Maljukov and Aleksandr Romadanov [1997], an example of the latter is the novel *Pautina* by Mercy Shelley [2002], and an example of the two combined is the novel by Kataev Brothers (a pseudonym), *Calf Butted with a Chair* [1999-2000]. The works in which virtual personalities become literary characters and the authors are revealed to be *virtual personae* are a vivid example of the convergence of belles-lettres and cyberspace in the common environment of imagination.

The development of the *virtual persona* genre within the LiveJournal as a whole has been extensive: there are hardly any new construction models, but the old ones are being constantly re-worked and revised. Among the main innovations, Maksim Kononenko's (mparker's) project, → **Vladimir Vladimirovich™**, which began in LiveJournal and acquired a popularity unseen by blogs and commercial success, is worth noting. The ironic portrayal of the Russian president and his entourage, and the daily commentaries on topical events within the virtual reality of Russian life constitute an artistic project that seems to have no direct analogy in the previous development of the genre. However, the main significance of LiveJournal is in the appearance of a numerically huge community of users distinguished by a high level of connectedness. There is a wide range of virtuality among users – from complete identification (with the use of a real name, biographical data and contact details) to almost complete anonymity (especially common among “observers” or “lurkers”, who themselves contribute very little if anything at all). The *virtual persona* as a creative form is developing in the space between these two polarities.

Conclusion

The first Russian *virtual personae*, or virtuals, as they are termed in colloquial speech, appeared in the pre-web period. In the early stages of the Internet, the possibility of easily creating “figures that do not exist in nature” [Exler 2000] was a novelty and experiments in this field were especially intensive. A whole constellation of *virtual personae* emerged on the Russian Internet, won fame and notoriety and became models for later imitation. However, the boom in virtualization quite quickly went into decline. By the end of the 1990s the life cycle of popular *virtual personae* had run its course and the majority of them had left the stage; virtuals, like the Internet as a whole,

had ceased to be perceived as something new and had started to irritate and become banal. Being a virtual became unfashionable and, in certain circles, even a cause for shame. However, the story of *virtual personae* does not end here. The appearance of blogs signalled a further democratization of the Internet and gave users a simple and convenient tool for self-expression (and self-invention). In Russia the incredible popularity of LiveJournal – a server of online diaries with the added possibility of controlling your circle and building up your own community – provided the impetus for a whole new wave of virtuals.

The *virtual persona* is a specific form of online self-representation, and a discrete creative genre on the Russian Internet. Unlike the English-language Internet, this genre is recognized as just that and has been legitimized with a corresponding category in a major Russian online literature competition.

The *virtual persona* is typologically linked to notions of illusory or artificially created personalities, which have a greater or lesser amount of free will. The closest literary analogies to the *virtual persona* are the character and lyrical hero. However, the *virtual persona* is not just a literary phenomenon; the capability of various *virtual personae* to interact within a single world (cyberspace) is a distinguishing feature of this type of creation.

The development of the *virtual persona* as a genre on the Russian Internet can be explained by a number of factors. First of all, the opportunity presented by the electronic medium to construct identities anonymously. This is a characteristic shared by the Internet as a whole, but on the Russian Internet it was put into practice in a specific way.

Secondly, the appearance of striking examples of *virtual personae* during the creation of the Russian Internet, which combined the qualities of literary heroes (description) with direct activity on the Internet (action) and which put into practice the principles of the game and of mystification. The model was infectious and a chain reaction re-

sulted. The genre developed through processes of imitation – reproduction of ready models – and emulation – the desire to surpass them. The joint action of mechanisms of imitation and repulsion led to modifications in the genre and reflections about its nature.

Thirdly, development of the *virtual persona* genre is supposedly facilitated by such tendencies in Russian culture as literature-centricity and personalism. The former indicates a major role for literature and the written word as opposed to the spoken word; the latter is the perception of social activity, more in personal than impersonal terms and a tendency towards an → **essentialist** view of the nature of personality. The appearance of such personae as Muxin or Detkina may be accidental but they are unlikely to have become so hugely popular and given rise to a wave of imitators if they had not found a resonance with the cultural models shared by users.

Comparing the West and Russia has always been a sensitive topic. Whatever one says, one will be classified in terms of some existing ideological trends. I try to abstain from thinking in binary oppositions or, which is almost the same, from any ideologies. I neither consider myself as a 'Westernizer' nor a 'Slavophile' but rather as a historian whose aim is to give a sensible explanation of historical facts. I'm aware that alternative explanations are possible and I'd be interested to see them. [Eugene Gorny]

Translation by Robert Greenall.