Peripherals and Vtubers – Sentient Dolls

We are reaching an point where current technology is becoming indistinguishable from those of The Peripheral (2014) by William Gibson. In the novel, peripherals mimic humans similarly to how the motion capture suits of today provide Vtubers, or virtual YouTubers with identity as Flynne describes in the novel (Chapter 87, Page 357), "prettier and tittier". An ethical dilemma arises both with Vtubers and false avatars that online audiences may prefer over the real identity and Flynne and Connor's peripherals whose identities that they prefer more than their own. Peripherals have the other problem of being operated by a primitive artificial intelligence which is glossed over but asks whether peripheral operators are ethical since Wilf Netherton avoids using one.

Today, anyone can operate their very own version of a peripheral. Using a motion capture suit similar to the neural cutout in the novel, a duplication of identities takes place and the avatar you create becomes you but not really you. The journal article by Kang discusses "CodeMiko" which is a real life example where the avatar eclipses the physical person who refers to herself as the operator (1). In the shortest chapter of the novel, which gives it a surrealistic quality, Frontierland, Wilf interacts with the Flynn and has difficulty in relating to her reality (Chapter 78, Page 318). Like Wilf, CodeMiko's real life audience has a surface level understanding of her online persona but lacks the depth which is provided by interacting physically. Reevaluating the relationship between Flynne and Wilf, we can say that the reason Gibson titled the novel after peripherals is it is a metaphor for meeting an idealized, fake personality of a person. In Wilf's eyes Flynne develops from faceless entity operating a drone, to a third-worlded polt (Chapter 26, Page. 103) controlling a peripheral and finally considering Flynn and her family with altruism after understanding that a real person is behind the peripheral's persona (Chapter 86, 355).

From Wilf's perspective, we see that many of his interactions with others happen while they are operating peripherals. In this case peripherals may be a euphemism for shallow relationships based on mutual interests. Kang also discusses that in the case of CodeMiko that viewers are interested in interactive manipulations of the avatar's appearance while having a lack of understanding over the science and expenses incurred by the real person to provide an experience like that (1). The article discusses a heightened, idealized expression of emotion by Vtubers, similar to the tetrachormia that Flynn experiences (Chapter 41, 176). Although these virtual avatars and peripherals are shallow, they lure audiences and their operators by being not completely human, the flip side of the uncanny valley. Wilf is somewhat of a peripheral himself like Lowbeer, not completely real and highly specialized in the art of manipulation (Chapter 44, 189). Yet there is a question that, although Wilf

encounters a variety of peripherals, he never operates one himself. In Body Language, Wilf states his aversion to Peripherals stating that they are "uniquely disturbing", the operator providing it with an aspect of their humanity through micro-expressions (Chapter 42, Page 179). Although Wilf lies to others, he wants deeper relationships with others, his self-hatred over his hypocrisy projected onto peripherals and post-humans (Chapter 8, Page 24).

Peripherals have the strongest impact on Conner by providing an outlet from physical trauma and PTSD. In The Sounds He Made (Chapter 49, Page 209), peripherals are emotional safe havens, albeit only temporarily, as powerful individuals may control their identities and with VTubers, large corporations who lease these expensive suits out (Rest of World). His peripheral, Pavel has a name unlike Flynn's but the novel emphasizes that, although Connor would like to live as Pavel via urinary catheter in perpetuity it is property owned by Lev's brother and not another identity to used for the benefit of the operator (Chapter 50, 211). Similarly, operators of virtual avatars, although putting in grueling hard work providing motion data but can eventually be replaced the article stating that a character has lost its soul after they fired the operator (Rest of World). Peripherals in the novel vary in their anthropomorphization, such as in The Nastiness, where Lowbeer and then Wilfe have difficulty treating them as just objects and almost as sentient individuals needing sleep and displaying emotions (Chapter 82, Page 335). Real life VTubers and Conner both find solace becoming objects that cannot age or be harmed, but in the end, peripherals are less like humans and more like dolls to be controlled and played around by those who actually own them and not their operators.

Works Cited

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