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Really Artificial or Artificially Real?

Fei-Yue Wang, *Chinese Academy of Sciences*

Intelligent Readers,

After a twenty-four-year absence, the experience of my first Chinese New Year back in China was really surreal. Two days before New Year's Eve, I stayed at an exotic resort called Commune by the Great Wall, located in a remote, quiet mountain area far away from the metropolitan Beijing. The resort was built along a valley and consists of a series of unconventional villas constructed either after traditional Chinese village houses or in the style of modern Western architecture. Walking among them, the effect was disorienting, and suddenly I wondered if the real buildings were actually virtual objects.

After hiking along a steep, slippery trail blanketed by snow, I ended up on the top of a hill surrounded by ruins of the ancient Great Wall (see Figure 1). For a moment, I felt completely immersed in reflection of the past, but eventually it was interrupted by traces of modern life: metal fencing, a caution sign, and two European tourists. Still, I could not help feeling really ancient at the time.

Later that night, back in my room, I was still thinking about the great contrast between the modern buildings and the ancient ruins. It presented me with a new dimension concerning real vs. virtual—actual vs. artificial—and gave me cause to reconsider my own research on the Web and social computing. I decided that my next letter from the editor would be titled “Really Artificial or Artificially Real?”

Two days after New Year's Eve, I was attempting to finish my letter while waiting for my flight in the new Terminal 3 of the Beijing Capital International Airport. But I couldn't focus: even in my modern, elegant surroundings, I couldn't stop thinking of the past—that, and my ears were still ringing from the past 48 hours. From the moment of sunset on New Year's Eve to the next day when I left for my flight, the city had been filled with the continuous boom of fireworks.

On that New Year's Eve, the sky was bright, colorful, and sometimes even frightening, and full of beautiful patterns and huge explosions. I was surprised that the New Year's Eve celebration was not an organized effort but an uncoordinated ensemble of individual actions. The size and sophistication of these fireworks was astonishing. The tiny firecrackers I remembered from my childhood were hard to find now. These modern explosives were much more impressive—some like large footballs, others the size of luggage—all with complicated firing patterns and functions. I've never been

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Figure 1. Fei-Yue at the ruins of the Great Wall of China.

in a real battlefield, but surrounded by clouds of acrid smoke with the thunderous crack of fireworks dancing and exploding all around me, I felt like I was in the midst of a war zone.

Of course, this “war” experience was really artificial, but its effect

on me was indeed artificially real. I believe that we will have increasingly more really artificial and artificially real phenomena in today’s Web-based societies. Such phenomena will reflect the true nature of many online/offline interactive activities and the main characteristics of many Web systems, theories, and technologies, and will be an underlying feature of our future lifestyle in a connected world.

In a happy coincidence, the first day of the New Tiger Year in China also happened to be St. Valentine’s Day. I’d like to take this special opportunity to wish a “double happiness” to all our readers, authors, associate editors, and editorial staff (please see Figure 2). ▣



Figure 2. Traditional Chinese image for “double happiness” and the coming of Spring. Double happiness to you all!

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