

# A choice of realities

*Followers of popular TV shows know that simulated reality can be much more palatable than real life. And as the internet enables people to create an infinite number of alternative worlds, Dr Leandro Herrero ponders the value of the unreal over the real*

**F**or the past few years, one of the US networks has been broadcasting a weekly episode of *The West Wing* where viewers are exposed to White House life under a fictitious president, Josiah Bartlet, played by Martin Sheen. It consistently reaches peak audiences and, despite its ups and downs, has a committed following and the usual paraphernalia of websites, chat groups, clubs, etc. Its unconditional audience love it. The UK storylines are at least a year behind the US and because it's not screened on the major channels, UK followers can, and do, go to the US website to find out in advance what's going to happen. I am told there are senior politicians over here who ask for weekly tapes to be shipped over so they can watch the same episodes as the US.

The *West Wing* of Bartlet's White House belongs to the Democrats and therefore most of the time is spent dealing with Republican interference. The US is deeply split politically, so it's interesting to see how the programme attracts such an enormous audience when half the potential viewers are in the other camp. But that is another story. Many US people identify with Bartlet's government and would declare it the best they have ever had or, at least, wish they had.

## The value of entertainment

Whichever way you look at it, the success of the show is fascinating. The pace of the action, the well-crafted environment (US politicians visiting the studios declare Bartlet's *West Wing* feels more real than the real one) the characters, plots, subplots and even plot-faultlines (there is a website that follows the plots' inconsistencies) are all attractive. These guys seem to work as a team; they are committed, driven, noble, ambitious, idealistic, patriotic and nice. So much so that recently the producers decided it was all too rosy and hired the team that produced *ER*, the hospital series, to inject some nastier stuff into the storylines.

The *West Wing* is a simulation of reality, an artificial world where viewers can project themselves, agree, disagree, criticise, fall in love, and so on. Reality is crafted and scripted weekly. The future can be influenced. It's also a tool for conversation. And it's only one of plenty artificial worlds available now. The internet explosion allows us to have as many as we want. Online communities

populated by thousands of people talking to each other without ever having physically met are popular. In cyberspace, we can have as many identities as we want. I can be a salesman from Paris, a woman, a schoolboy, a fetishist or myself, all in parallel. *Sim City*, a cyber-computer game where you can build 'real-life' communities with characters and plots, has hundreds of thousands of people playing all the time and is one of the so-called 'God games'. Psychological disciplines that deal with identity and personality have not caught up with this new world of possibilities.

## Safe havens in simulation

We all have a West, or Best, Wing somewhere, an artificial world we use as a mirror, a model, a target of our frustrations or recipient of our emotions. Simulation and artificial worlds are safe places to display various aspects of our alter egos. For example, instead of discussing how pathetic our team is, we can discuss how well the Bartlet team works. Instead of having a real-life political discussion about people who do exist, we can choose to discuss the dynamics of the political life of *West Wing* characters who do not. Surreal as this may seem, this is how it works. Indeed, the writers and actors of *West Wing* were invited a while ago to the UK prime minister's office for talks about God knows what. Or was it just an entertaining event to declare admiration? Did the UK prime minister or his director of communications learn anything from them? Does *The West Wing* team of writers know more about political manoeuvring than the real-life politicians? Is it possible to learn communications, political dynamics, team interaction stuff, negotiating skills, you name it, from, say, *The West Wing*?

Few responsible adults would publicly acknowledge they take role models from the screen but that may be the case, and it doesn't have to be conscious. Since we are surrounded by so many artificial worlds, mainly electronic ones, statistics suggest this is a good source. When the simulation is good, or if it projects and articulates our desires in ways that can't be found in reality, the artificial world takes over.

There is a dangerous aspect here and it's very real. The intrusion and pervasive nature of these worlds make them real and they occupy our brain space in a real way. To that extent, *Friends*, the *Sopranos*, *ER* and *The West Wing* are reality. They provide us with scripts, characters and plots that are more manageable, predictable, closer and safer to look at than our real next door neighbours, office plots, and dreadful bosses. What was once the patrimony of dreams is now owned by NBC.

The social consequences of all this are not yet

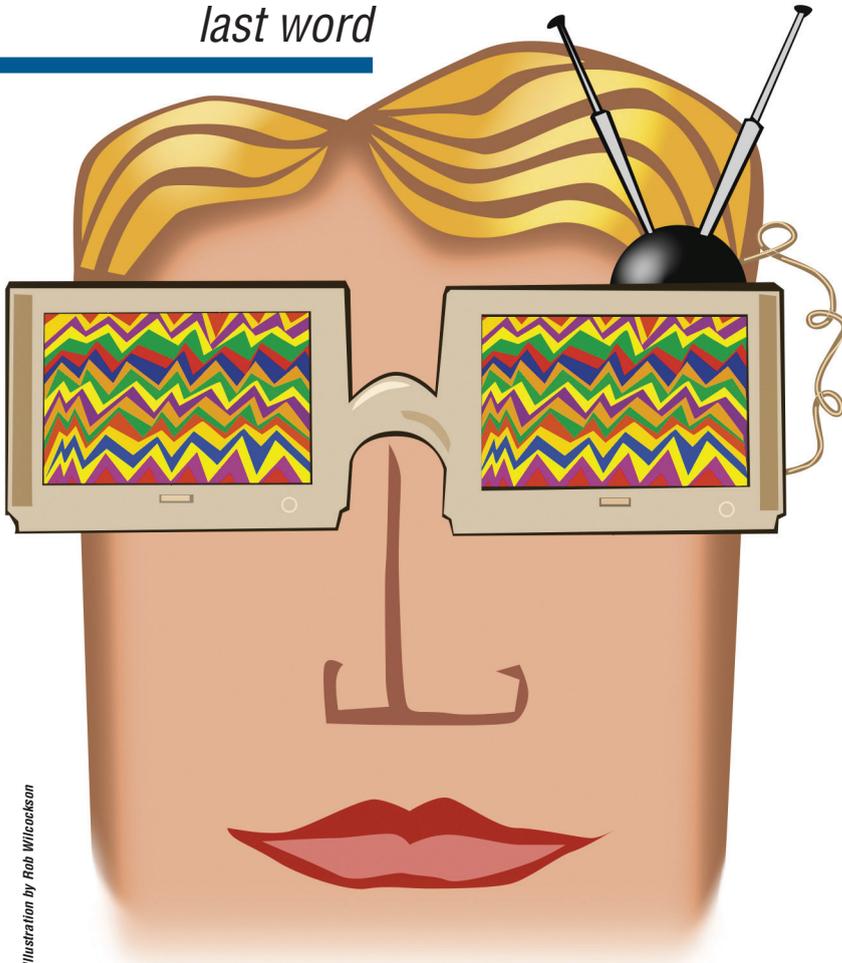


Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

Which is more real: the world we experience through our favourite television programmes or the world that produces such television programmes?

established although, as you can imagine, sociologists and social anthropologists are having a ball. Simulations (on screen) and reality become interchangeable. Does the social model of Friends reflect reality, or does reality copy from Friends, or both?

Journalist Ethan Watters has written about the US generation, aged 25 to 39, that has not yet married. His book 'Urban tribes' talks of "the ones who live in bohemian garrets yet feel affluent because their baby boomer parents will probably leave them their money... Demographers call them 'never-marrieds' and say they're one of the fastest-growing groups in America".

### More social structures

There are more and more new structures and dynamics coming into the social arena every day. The current real world would have felt unreal just a short while ago; the unreal worlds of our own Best Wings are nicer and more 'real' than reality. Indeed, computer game software production has in many cases overtaken the film industry in complexity and money. Simulation and online play in anonymous cyberspace is a safer way to be real when the real real feels dangerous or unsettling. Certainly it has less real-life killing. War games are widely used by the military to analyse all sort of situations and prepare for strategic decisions.

In the business arena, simulation materials in the form of training, strategic or planning tools have also been growing steadily but have not completely taken over traditional tools and processes. Could their pervasive qualities be used in, say, management education? Computer games

are a good source for management training but are not widely used yet. I have little doubt, however, that this area will grow fast and soon.

Simulation of business situations has traditionally been done on paper and, in business education, relegated largely to the dry and uninspiring case study. There is a whole industry creating and selling such cases and awarding prizes to the best ones. Either the case study grows up, gets electronic, interactive, simulator-like and dynamic or it will become extinct. How will adjunct professors and aspiring academics spend their days then? The truth is that using the retrospective case study – such as what happened when Toyota went to the US? or to the car industry in Germany? – to refer to some incredibly boring time in my own past, has no suspense because it has no possibilities. You may not know *a priori* what happened to Toyota, but once you have figured it out and after hours of pain, the professor will tell you. There are not two or three possible realities, just one scenario, history.

### When the unreal harms the real

Is it possible to overdo simulation and artificial worlds to the detriment of real life? Yes, and perhaps we are just beginning to do just that. "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans," John Lennon once sang. Today, we would say that life is what happens when you're busy simulating life. It happens every day when the old or not-so-old lady has the TV on 24 hours a day and a stream of US, Brazilian, English and Mexican soap operas, sitcoms and other series percolate her room, her furniture, her cat and her brain. It happens when the young or not-so-young guy plays online games on the internet for hours in his pyjamas 'interacting' with a mixture of real and unreal partners. I am sure you can imagine other situations or artificial worlds that simulate reality.

Is there a cure for this? Yes. It's cheap, but unfortunately very difficult; it involves staying in a room on your own in total silence. French philosopher Pascal said many of the ills of this world could be cured if man could stay in a room alone. Even there, however, immunity is not ensured because the imagination will create its own worlds that are real, vivid, and only avoidable if you ascribe to some sort of Eastern philosophy and repeat a mantra at regular intervals to focus or unfocus your mind. Otherwise, the only way to produce artificial worlds is that which gives us our dreams. Fortunately nature was kind enough to give some of us the ability to have no clue as to what was dreamt. Most of those who do remember are on psychoanalysts' waiting lists. SM

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