MALLEABLE, DIGITAL, AND POSTHUMAN

A Permanently Beta Life

Ignas Kalpokas

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Malleable, Digital, and Posthuman: A Permanently Beta Life

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to my daughter Rachele Ona, who was born at the beginning of my writing process.

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Acknowledgements

Where do I even start giving thanks for making it possible to write a book in the midst of the pandemic? As usual, at the top of the list must be my wife Julija, without whose help and support this book would have been impossible. Then my boys Klemensas and Frederikas, who struggle to understand the concept of their parents *working* from home. And who can blame them?

Then things get messier – testament to a very messy year indeed. A big thank you to my students, whom I have come to know perhaps more closely than I would otherwise would – their home environments, their kitchen (and, well, other) sounds, etc., and, no doubt, this has been mutual. Worn down by lockdown, by writing, by being confined to home with the children, they have known me at my worst and most miserable. And, in some cases, so have I.

It is by no means a surprise that this is a book about interconnectedness and malleability through mutual testing. Even though the book was started in the months prior to the pandemic, the experience of 2020 has certainly further underscored the fallacy of anthropocentrism, of any idea that we can lead self-sufficient lives insulated from our environment. Definitely, 2020 was the year when the world struck back – both nature and, in response to the nature-induced crisis of the pandemic, the technological layer of our existence. Combining life in full knowledge of being a mere node in multiple intersecting agglomerations in a social environment still primed to human exceptionalism, one that formulates demands accordingly, is bound to be a challenging experience. Hence, this book is written in the hope that we will leave the pandemic world wiser and not with our heads more deeply buried in sand. Let's explore!

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Introduction

This book focusses on the increasing malleability and fluidity of the world and, especially, of the human – a process that renders both the self and the environment into a permanently beta version, co-constituted within agglomerations of platforms, devices, physical infrastructures and humans. It is argued that, due to the multi-way relationships that characterise such agglomerations, both stability and predictable change are lacking (contrary to the mainstream promise of data to bring transparency and predictability), giving rise to a permanently beta existence. As it is hardly possible to analyse this condition from a mainstream anthropocentric framework, this book also proposes a posthumanist research methodology for future research in this area.

Living the New Reality

While this book is the result of a prolonged writing process, significant parts of the text were produced while spending the coronavirus lockdown of spring 2020 in the small village of Lakštučiai in the middle of rural Lithuania. Meanwhile, the closing stages dragged into the second lockdown, in the following autumn and winter, struggling with pandemic realities, school closures and other attributes of the new reality while cramped in our family apartment in Kaunas. Perhaps if there ever was a need for an event that would underscore the futility of anthropocentric accounts of the world, the coronavirus pandemic certainly hit the spot, turning humans, for the most part, into passive observers of their neat and comfortable world and convenient lifestyles crumbling. No less, the disruption to, in many cases, almost complete stoppage of social life, the ensuing condition of working, learning and socialising online from home that had replaced face-to-face interactions with their mediatised versions and the resulting changes in everyday culture have made the book's effort to demonstrate the critical importance of mutually constructive interrelationships between humans, code, data, technology, etc., ever more pertinent. Likewise, all of the preceding – the crumbling of what was seemingly stable and taken for granted as well as the clear primacy of interactivity – point to the core assertion of permanent malleability of life itself.

Also pertinent to the argument made was the personal experience of moving, albeit temporarily, into a rural community and a reliving of the life and its entanglements often relegated to the margins by our falsely anthropocentric civilisation. The whimsicality of the weather, the capacity of frost to destroy the fruits of human labour, the necessity to live with, rather than conquer, nature, the seasonal changes

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of life and vegetation – all of those (and many other) aspects of life can easily be (and usually are) lost under the conditions of contemporary urban-first life. Nevertheless, if this was merely a rural idyll or some kind of Walden-like utopia, it would be far less interesting. However, once this experience is paired with the newly found complexity of everyday activities, such as trying to do synchronous online teaching while simultaneously looking after three small children whose school and nursery had closed, and with the dependence on the reliability of Internet connection and of one's devices for even the most basic necessities like food (apparently, it is possible to get almost anything delivered even to a village quite far away from any major city) and work, then the flat ontology advocated in the final chapter of this book makes immediate sense. Hence, in this way and others, the pandemic has served as a quasi-Heideggerian moment of unconcealment in which the true nature of Being allows a glimpse of itself.

Notably, the Being thereby unconcealed has its own specific presence that is far removed from anything stable and unitary – instead, this book is about life that is lived as part of co-present entanglements within complex and hybrid agglomerations. These agglomerations are complex because they involve multiple and multidirectional relations of causation: each agglomerated element is simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by at least one (although usually many more) other agglomerated element(s); likewise, such agglomerations are hybrid because they are composed of elements of very different nature – tangible and intangible, natural and artificial, present and imaginary, etc. While a finite list of elements thus agglomerated is hardly possible, for the purposes of this book, the agglomerations will be primarily seen to include humans, code (which also includes algorithms and the broader digital architecture), data, devices (including both actively used, such as smartphones, and passively used, such as ubiquitous sensors), networks and other technological infrastructure, signals that travel through the networks, the natural environment, mental constructs (such as ideas and identities), etc. Moreover, the term 'agglomeration' is intentional. While, for example, posthumanist scholars typically use the term 'assemblage', it is held that the latter still carries too much intentionality: for something to be an assemblage, there needs to be an assembling action or at least intention. The term 'agglomeration', meanwhile, provides for greater spontaneity and internal co-constitution.

The core argument of this book is that interaction between co-constitution of the plethora of agglomerated elements results in a permanently beta life characterised by constant malleability and optimisation towards specific types of interactions, typically those pertaining to datafication. The term is, of course, borrowed from software development jargon, where programs designated as 'beta' are in a pre-release stage, being tested under real circumstances by large groups of users to provide a fresh-eye look at quality and functionality – such versions 'have gone through alpha testing in-house and are generally fairly close in look, feel and function to the final product; however, design changes often occur as a result' (PC Mag, n.d.); similar definitions are also provided by the Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries.

As Cheney-Lippold (2017, p. 90) observes, beta versions exist 'in a developmental limbo […] in which users […] toy with a program in order to find and

weed out bugs from its final distribution'. The two characteristics central to the preceding definition – lack of finality and necessity of debugging – are also the defining features of life today. While less focussed on the mechanics (what would be the primary domain of alpha testing), this book focusses on the tentative public manifestations of users and their environments, in which humans, as well as digital, mechanical and physical environments, are engaged in outwards-facing multidirectional testing and trying inter-action. Particularly in case of the human user, datafication, algorithmisation, platformisation and other related transformations have rendered the self into a set of interfaces that ultimately somehow connect to the core. The latter also demonstrates a further important feature of beta testing: it is performed not only by humans but also by the entire physical, technological and digital environment (although to some extent the same applies to the original case – software – because compatibility, both with hardware and other software, is no less important than usability) interactively and simultaneously.

Likewise, Hepp (2020, pp. 58–59) points towards digital media as 'permanently beta', particularly in contexts where one deals with self-learning algorithms that, courtesy to the latter function, 'contribute to an additional processual dynamic' – and such autonomous operation 'has become part of what media are'. Hence, malleability and constant testing/adaptation through real-life encounters and use is characteristic of both users (on both personal and social – which, within the ambit of this book, is represented by the political – domains) and their digital/technological ecosystems. As a result, betafication (being rendered a beta version of oneself) becomes a universal characteristic, applicable irrespective of the nature of the element in question. It is a matter of near-universal testability, not merely through direct interaction (as in a user beta testing a system through actual use) but also in an anticipatory way, e.g., when users have their environments pre-tested in advance by data-based models of themselves (which is what personalisation ultimately means). In this way, users encounter an environment which is always already *as if they had already beta tested it themselves*. In that sense, we may have, in part, already arrived at a future postulated by some digital optimists (see, e.g., Domingos, 2017; Mayer-Schönberger & Ramge, 2019) where the user can do little, because their data doppelganger is doing all the trying, testing and matching work – the difference being that in this book it is more of a critical tool than a desirable state of affairs. Simultaneously, users also do not escape unscathed: as is demonstrated in this book, the self is betafied in return, in numerous ways.

As a note on terminology, the relationship between some key ideas needs elucidation. This book features the term 'malleability' quite often. As such, it refers to openness to beta testing and the subsequent debugging in accordance with the results of such testing. Betafication, meanwhile, is the process of rendering elements open and amenable to beta testing and is itself a corollary to datafication, as it primarily happens in a data form through recursive data loops. Nevertheless, as shown in the final chapter, it effectively only mimics the broader processes of embeddedness, meaning that humans, along with any other elements of the natural and technological environments, are malleable by default.

Out of the many possibilities and combinations that thus become available, this book analyses three domains: the betafication of the environment, the betafication of the self and the betafication of the social (although, due to the complexity of the latter, it is represented in this book by one of its aspects – the political). Such analysis subsequently leads to a discussion of the methodological implications of posthumanism and a flat ontology that are seen to underlie betafication with the aim of developing a research methodology suitable for analysing the complex co-constitution of permanently beta life.

Out of the three categories of betafication highlighted above, 'the environment' perhaps appears the most nebulous. For the purposes of this book, the environment can be defined as the sum total of digital architecture, affective flows and the life-world composed of perceived physical and interpersonal conditions. It is not something relatively stable and pre-given (as it would be if one concentrated solely on the physical environment) but, instead, malleable as a result of algorithmic analysis of data flows, thereby putting it at a double bind with users – the environment, of course, shapes the individual users, but the data generated by those same users simultaneously shape the environment. This mutually co-constitutive relationship mediated by data sets up a pattern for what is discovered in the subsequent chapters on betafication.

In relation to the above definition, it must also be noted that the term 'user' is being used throughout the book synonymously with 'human' or 'person' to reflect the fact that we are all now users of platforms, services and devices and are so almost all the time – either as a matter of our own intent (as in using purchased devices or services/platforms that we have signed up for) or as an imposed default condition of everyday life (such as using the infrastructure of a 'smart city'); likewise, in both cases, we permanently are users of the vast technological infrastructures that enable connectivity, from network masts to cables to data centres. This usership by default is a necessary condition of betafication, since it enables the rich and thick flows of data that lie at the heart of mutual co-constitution of the environment, the self and the social, while such permanent co-constitution leads to permanent malleability of the entire life – life as permanently beta.

It must be stressed that many of the characteristics and life circumstances discussed in this book are not completely new *as such* (for example, the self has always been malleable through interactions with the environment or other selves, the pretences of anthropocentrism have always been wrong, meaning that the ontology of this world has always been flat, etc.). What truly matters within the ambit of this book is that all of these aspects have been made *qualitatively different* under the conditions that Andrejevic (2020, p. 41) refers to as 'automated mediatization', whereby 'media technologies and practices are coming to permeate life in unprecedented and unanticipated ways that are facilitated by and impossible without automated data collection, processing, sorting and response'. Still, one must not exclusively concentrate on the digital – instead, the affordances of objects matter as well, because they 'project certain potentialities or suggest a set of actions by those coming into contact with them' (Southerton & Taylor, 2020, p. 7). Such objects may include not only physical environmental artifacts but also, and perhaps more poignantly, devices used for communication, work,

entertainment, sensors, appliances (particularly if connected to the Internet of Things) and other objects that we end up entering into agglomerations with. It is in the complex co-constitution of the preceding elements, the physical referents of the users' selves, the natural environment (not only the relatively stable environmental conditions – inasmuch as they can be referred to as 'stable' under conditions of climate change or, rather, catastrophe – but also sudden occurrences, such as pandemics), mental constructs shared among humans, etc., that betafication – as complete malleability and constant drive towards debugging – is located.

But Is That Really Different?

No argument can appear out of nowhere and without resemblances to what has come in the past. One of the potential affinities of this book is with Smythe's work on the commodification of the audience. Smythe (2012[1981], p. 188) grounds his argument on the assumption that, just like a true commodity, 'audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed', and that is done for a price. However, the audience is not simply a tradable and consumable commodity – for him, the audience is a commodity that performs a work of its own (Smythe, 2012[1981], p. 185). And while subsequent developments have by no means proved this hypothesis to be incorrect, the mechanics of commodification have nevertheless changed. In a media environment of the older time (dominated, as it was, by media like television), it used to hold true that large chunks of the audience were bought and sold in bulk, as portions of the population that 'will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communication […] in particular market areas' (Smythe, 2012[1981], p. 188). While this thinking is not completely antiquated, there is nevertheless substantially more interaction within the present environment, as shown in this book. First, datafication is enabling a much more bottom-up process, in which audiences are, first of all, sources of data, with the results of data analysis being subsequently fed back; secondly, audiences are no longer purchased in bulk through centralised attention-grabbing formats – instead, the process has become personalised, with particular users being targeted for their personal characteristics, often via automated auctions; and third, the scale of the operation has changed, because while in the more traditional media environment one could have isolated particular times when the audience was at work (watching their favourite show, for example), in today's environment, this process is constant, courtesy to the ubiquity of sensors and datafication as well as complete permeation of media through effectively every aspect of human life.

In effect, there has been a shift from temporality-based audience work a la Smythe (where we are all watching X at the same time) to profile-based consumer work and atemporal audiences (see, e.g., Miller, 2020, p. 135). Particularly for the latter reason, there has been a further change: while, for Smythe (2012[1981], p. 186), entire social structures had to be involved in training for and enabling of audience work – in his own words, '[m]arital relations, child care and development,

decision making – all these functions are somehow involved with audience work', with schools and other institutions being equally implicated, the combination of environmental surveillance (Andrejevic, 2017, 2020) and deep mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020) have meant that the audience parts of the cycle – data input and consumption of the targeted message – are now happening by default, simply by using the digital infrastructures of everyday life, suspending humans within a 'multi-dimensional calculative space' (Lury & Day, 2019, p. 26). Hence, one could argue that both the breadth and the depth of commodification have been increased. Instead of the Shakespearean assertion of the whole world being a stage, it is now reasonable to claim that the whole world is an interface which enables a process of commodification that is both universal and interactive. It is the latter quality that also interlaces commodification with betafication.

A further step down the commodification route was, for Smythe (2012[1981], p. 200), the depersonalisation of the audience, which was being sold and bought as a 'statistical abstraction'. Indeed, in the more traditional media environment, one needed to focus on large numbers to probabilistically get the desired results, such as the intended amount of purchase (Smythe, 2012[1981], p. 189). The latter has become more complicated – one of the selling points of targeted advertising is that it enables targeting only individuals that we already know to be susceptible, instead of casting a wide net. Nevertheless, as will be shown later on in this book, the user is suspended in an in-between state: simultaneously freed from being a mere statistical abstraction due to personalisation but, simultaneously, still embedded in the multitude, because knowledge of the individual can only be based on knowledge of, and correlations between, large numbers of individuals. Meanwhile, the goal is still, admittedly, unchanged: the work of the audience still lies in 'learning to buy goods and to spend their income accordingly', with the number of potential choices increasing with the ever-growing number of goods and services on offer (Smythe, 2012[1981], pp. 195–196). The latter has become even more overwhelming due to the general cognitive overload, induced by the highly saturated media environment, in turn making personalisation (instead of Smythe's emphasis on massification) particularly relevant.

Some of such changes had already been captured in the early literature on personalisation: as Castells (2009[1997], p. 157) noted, not only media are extremely diverse but also they 'send targeted messages to specific segments of audiences and to specific moods of the audiences' while simultaneously providing a degree (a nascent one at that time) of interactivity. As a result, according to Castells (2009[1997], p. 157), '[i]nstead of a global village we are moving towards mass production of customized cottages'. The metaphor is particularly apt – the current environment is that of multiple parts that nevertheless interrelate with the whole and remain embedded within it – not atomisation but clusterisation. Simultaneously, as Castells (2009[1997], p. 159) correctly observes, 'the emergence of a new social structure is necessarily linked to the redefinition of the material foundations of life, *time* and *space*', and the contemporary manifestation of change – a shift towards what he calls 'the network society' – happens to be organised around 'timeless time, the space of flows'. Time has become timeless in the sense that interactions can happen instantly, in a split second, but simultaneously also with

elements that had been present (e.g., posted or uploaded) any amount of time ago; space, meanwhile, is one of constantly flowing interactions and data that seemingly effortlessly interrelate any number of elements in any number of places – tendencies that have only increased since Castells was making the assertions above. In this way, the timelessness of time and the flux of space have jointly constituted the permanence of betafication as anything anywhere can be affected, tested and modified by anything else at any time while also affecting, testing and modifying other elements in return.

The permeation by the media of virtually any layer and aspect of human life certainly has consequences on the self as well, in terms of understanding both oneself and one's environment. In this situation, as Postman (2015[1985], p. 15) observes, the media have *become* our language and our metaphors; and since, for him, it is language that construes our access to nature, motivation and ideology while 'metaphors create the content of our culture', the media should now be accordingly seen as a universal interface, structuring the perception of and interaction with ourselves and our surroundings. Moreover, one must also accept another of Posner's arguments – that the development of the contemporary media has notably contributed to the shift of power from open control to structuration of pleasure and satisfaction; hence, the world is less Orwellian and more Huxleyan (Postman, 2005[1985], p. 155). And while Postman's emphasis on watching is, again, predicated primarily on the television era, it can nevertheless be easily extrapolated to today's world of media ubiquity, and conceiving life 'as a perpetual round of entertainments' (Postman, 2005[1985], p. 155) bears special relevance for the competition over attention described in this book. Simultaneously, while Postman did not live to see the current flourishing of digital technologies, his assertions of technological overreliance, a realisation that whatever the computer shows becomes an indisputable pronouncement of fact and a judgement – a role once performed by an assertion of God's will (Postman, 1993), sounds eerily accurate, if only the word 'computer' was substituted by 'algorithm'. Hence, what Postman seems to lament here (with great relevance for today) is a double loss of human autonomy and thinking capacity – through pleasure (amusement) and through delegation of authority. Nevertheless, as this book demonstrates, such a shift has been not an aberration – merely erosion of the figment (self-)mastery that had been illusional all the way.

Still, one might rightfully enquire into the role and construction of the self in this intersection of the digital (software, data, etc.), technological (hardware, connections, etc.) and physical (the natural environment) that characterises today's world (an interesting account of such multiplicity is provided by, e.g., Ball, 2020a). Here, again, a rather significant shift can be identified. Earlier attitudes towards digital transformations can be well exemplified by Nakamura's work on cybertypes (a term that is, of course, a play on 'stereotype'). On the one hand, the latter constitute 'the distinctive ways that the Internet propagates, disseminates and commodifies images of race and racism' through the establishment of dominant online representations of underprivileged groups, while on the other, they enable women and 'all of the Internet's invisible minorities [to] log on to Net and be taken for "white", participate in an ideology of liberation from

marginalized and devalued bodies' (Nakamura, 2002, pp. 3–4). However, as is shown in the chapters that follow, today's datafied body knows no such fantasy, although identity work to conform with particular cybertypes still continues. If, in the early 1990s, a legendary *New Yorker* cartoon featured two dogs using a computer with the caption 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog', today not only you are instantly identified as a dog, but also your breed, age, daily walks, other dogs and cats that you fight with, the condition of your fur and many other bits of information would be instantly known. In this context, the tension between and negotiation of the datafied self and the presence of prescriptive cybertypes give rise to a self that is permanently under construction, permanently worked on at the point of interaction between the (actual or perceived) 'is' and the (perceived or enforced) 'ought' – hence, again, a permanent beta version. In this way, one moves closer to the notion of networked selves once described by boyd (2014).

The increased knowability of users and the rise of the networked self are directly attributable to the rise of the platform economy. While it is not the aim for this book to present a detailed discussion of the phenomenon (for that, see Kalpokas, 2019a), some general remarks are, nevertheless, necessary. To understand platform economy, one must begin, with Srnicek (2017, p. 43), to interpret online platforms as 'an efficient way to monopolise, extract, analyse and use the increasingly large amounts of data that [are] being recorded'. Such generation of value takes place through what Blanke and Pybus (2020, pp. 1 and 11) call 'a multitude of interconnected services' providing services to everybody else, including secondary service providers, and operating within closed walls, in contrast with the generally open spirit of the Internet. Hereby, the platform economy operates by means of 'processes of data commodification' (Barns, 2019, p. 3) and ever-more efficient value extraction (Berardi, 2021, p. 37). In this way, the interactivity and constant capacity to affect and be affected in return that characterises today's world has become utterly monetizable.

More precisely, platforms should be seen as 'digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact', becoming intermediaries for bringing together different users, such as 'customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers and even physical objects' (Srnicek, 2017, p. 43). Platforms are, therefore, effective in matching the supply of labour, attention or other resources with demand as well as improving connections between individuals (Barns, 2019, p. 5). In doing so, platforms rely on a phenomenon, known as 'network effects', whereby 'the more numerous the users who use the platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else' (Srnicek, 2017, p. 45). After all, the more meaningful interactions one can have on the platform, the more valuable it is deemed to be, thus enticing more people to join in, and as more people join in, the fewer meaningful interactions are available outside that platform – the same principle applies to everything from interpersonal communication to accommodation and ride sharing.

As advertising constitutes one of the main revenue streams for online platforms, they play a key role in the datafication of everyday life by means of tracking every action and interaction available. Indeed, it must be stressed that