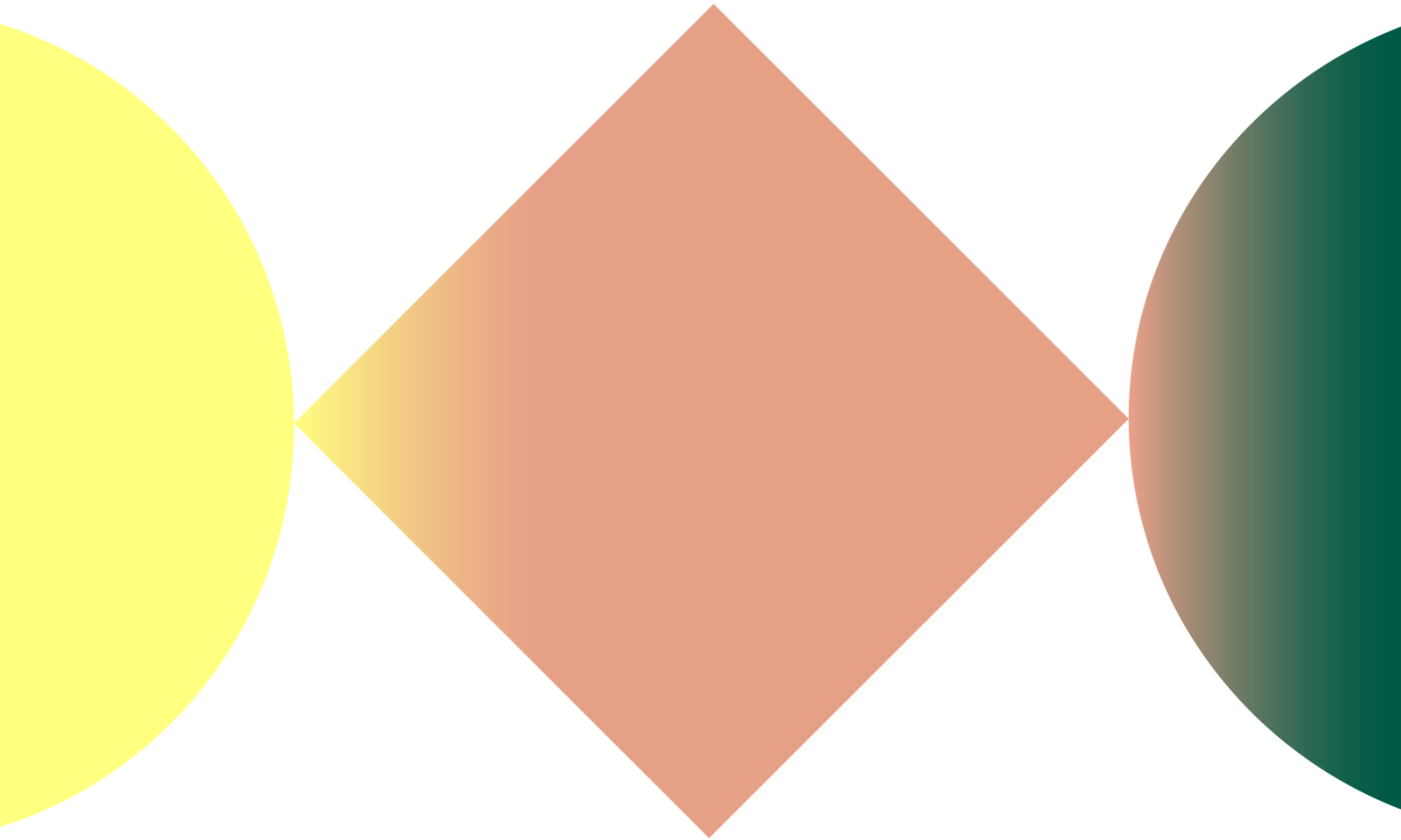




FUTURE UNILAB

Being Human in a Digital World

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1. Introduction

1. 1. The visionary team

The Being Human in a Digital World Visionary Team started in April 2024.

Participants in the visionary team:

Name	Last Name	University Nomination
David	Alonso	UCM
Tobias	Cramer	UNIBO
Melissa	Plath	UH / Una Europa
Maggy	Ovaa	Universitet Leiden / Una Europa
Marcin	Klimek	Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
Caterina	Moruzzi	The University of Edinburgh

1. 2. The process

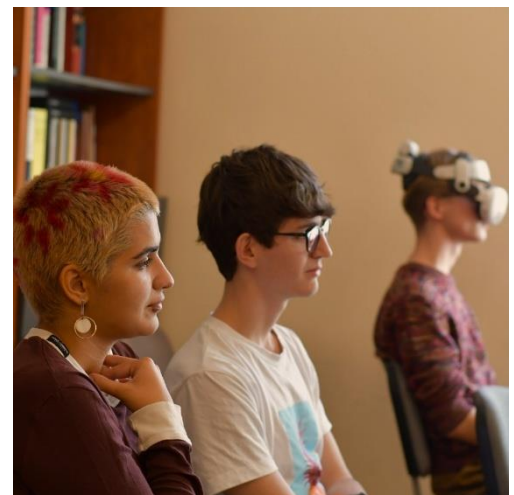
The visionary team has organized several meetings to discuss the topic of Being Human in a Digital World. The team has discussed issues such as how identity should be represented in the digital space; critical elements of communication; the relationship between real and digital identities and how these are represented or codified and the constraints in these intersections; the concept of European Values and how the meaning of specific values might change depending on country, language, etc., and how these are represented digitally; and how human values and constraints impact the digital world and our behavior connecting the questions of identity, values, and the digital world.

The visionary team decided to focus on students as the target group for the output. The actual output consists of an online debate with students on the topic of being human in a digital world. The online debate was organized in Meta Horizon Workroom, so the students and visionaries were able to experiment with innovative tools of online conferencing and use of Virtual Reality. The aim of this report is to show the results of the online debate and to define the conclusions of the visionary team.

2. Online student debate

2. 1. Topic of the debate

Students' experiences as learners and as humans are becoming increasingly digitized. Learning no longer takes place exclusively in physical spaces on campus, and interactions with instructors and fellow students no longer happen exclusively in person. Similarly, experiences of identity building, friendship building, and cultural expressions are increasingly built around and in digital spaces. What does it mean to be human in these digital worlds? How can our humanness be reinforced, re-envisioned, or expanded? Where do experiences as a student and a learner intersect or depart from the broader questions of confronting digital worlds?



2. 2. Format of the debate

Students were invited to a virtual debate on the theme of Being Human in a Digital World. The debate consisted of a set of dilemmas, prompts, and impossibilities to spur conversation and exchanges of views to provide student insights on these tricky questions and, more broadly, to experiment with potential approaches to making digital worlds more human. VR was used to experiment with innovative forms of conferencing.



2. 3. Participants

Lead of the debate: Marcin Klimek (CEO Exploded View, Jagiellonian University)

Participating students:

- Jagiellonian University:
 - Simone Giardili;
 - Anya Didenko;
 - Mikołaj Olczak;
- University of Helsinki
 - Saana Laaksonen
- University of Leiden:
 - Eline Remmerswaal



Participating support staff:

- Natalia Szymańska (Jagiellonian University)

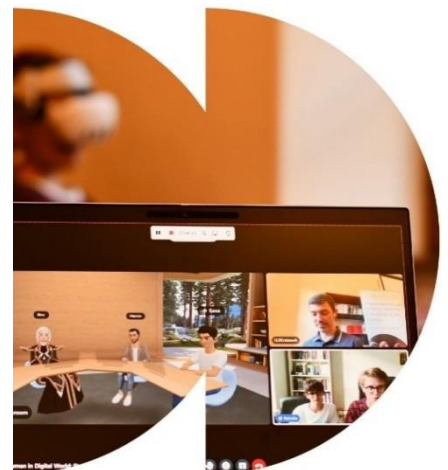
2. 4. Event details

- Date: 6th November,
- Time of debate: 13:00 – 13:45 CET;
- Selection process on the Universities level;
- Preparation and onboarding: 60 mins earlier;
- Results: video with highlights and written report.



2. 5. Debate topics

1. Introductions;
2. Identity and anonymity in digital worlds;
3. Social aspects of turning virtual;
4. Culture aspect of preservation;
5. Education in digital worlds.



3. Outcomes of the debate

Young people are uniquely positioned to navigate and shape this evolving landscape as the digital and physical worlds intertwine more deeply. A group of students from Leiden, Helsinki, and Cracow recently convened to discuss the relationship between these realms as a part of Una Europa Visionary Team research entitled "Being Human in a Virtual World". The discussion took place in the Meta Workrooms virtual 3D space. Simone Giardili, Anya Didenko, and Mikołaj Olczak from Jagiellonian University, Saana Laaksonen from the University of Helsinki, and Eline Remmerswaal from the University of Leiden shared their insights shedding light on how digital technologies influence identity, relationships, and cultural engagement, offering both opportunities and challenges. Participants had an opportunity to attend the virtual debate using both Virtual Reality headsets including Meta Quest 2 and Meta Quest 3 as well as a more traditional approach using a traditional video conferencing approach on the PC. Below, you can find the outcomes of the discussion, while the full debate is available [here](#).

3. 1. Understanding the dependency between virtual and physical worlds

The students unanimously acknowledged the interplay between the virtual and physical realms, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a balance. Mikołaj reflected on his youth when online gaming was a major pastime due to limited travel opportunities. While the virtual world offered him a way to connect and engage during that time, he now prioritizes offline interactions, which he finds richer and more meaningful.

Elina supported this sentiment, pointing out that while digital interactions are invaluable in situations where physical meetings are impossible, they lack the authenticity and natural flow of in-person interactions. For her, physical presence simplifies friendships and fosters deeper connections.

Saana, on the other hand, presented a counterpoint by sharing her experience at the Una Europa Student Congress in September 2024. Initially, the congress provided a physical platform for networking, but the connections continued virtually through a series called After Lectures. Saana valued this online continuity, explaining how it allowed her to forge friendships across distances that would have been impossible to maintain otherwise.

Simon, however, warned of the risks of relying too heavily on digital platforms for relationships. While he acknowledged their ability to help build confidence, he described a "comfort zone" that can make individuals reluctant to step out into the unpredictability of real-life social interactions. Anya agreed, noting that while online interactions are valuable, they lack the depth and spontaneity of face-to-face connections.

3. 2. Presenting oneself and sharing information online

The discussion delved into how young people craft and share their identities online.

Avatars and virtual characters stood out as powerful tools for self-expression. Saana and Elina found particular joy in using avatars to experiment with their appearance, describing it as an opportunity to explore styles and traits they might not dare to in real life. Saana added that crafting a virtual persona can sometimes feel more authentic, as it allows individuals to express aspects of their true selves free from societal judgment.

3. 3. Forming relationships in the virtual world vs. real life

Relationships were a central theme in the discussion, with students comparing the dynamics of virtual and physical connections. Saana's experience at the Una Europa Student Congress underscored the potential of virtual platforms to nurture relationships across distances. She emphasized how these platforms allowed her to sustain bonds that would have been difficult to maintain in a purely physical context.

Mikołaj, however, expressed concerns about an over-reliance on digital connections. While they can alleviate loneliness temporarily, he argued that true fulfillment comes from face-to-face interactions. "You can't stop feeling lonely without a physical meeting," he stated, highlighting the irreplaceable value of real-world companionship.

Simon added a nuanced perspective, observing that digital interactions can be both a confidence booster and a crutch. He noted that some individuals feel safer sharing personal stories online, but this comfort can sometimes hinder their ability to engage in deeper, more vulnerable interactions offline. Anya agreed, stating that while digital platforms are a great starting point, they often lack the unpredictability and emotional depth that define real-life relationships. It's still impossible to deliver life-like experiences online, even using the latest technologies like advanced hand tracking or facial capture technologies.

3. 4. Digital technology in culture cultivation and preservation

The students were particularly intrigued by the intersection of digital technology and cultural preservation. Mikołaj shared his experience at the Wyspiański Museum in Cracow, where VR was used to present artworks together with the physical locations that inspired them. While he appreciated the immersive aspect, he emphasized that no virtual experience could replicate the sensory richness of being physically present at a site.

Simon described his experience with digital reconstructions of destroyed buildings, noting that while visually impressive, they often felt "flat" and lacked emotional resonance. Saana, who had not yet experienced VR reconstructions firsthand, expressed curiosity about their potential but was cautious about relying on them entirely for cultural education.

Elina and Saana discussed the role of AI in cultural preservation. Elina saw AI as a promising tool for reconstructing lost artifacts or interpreting history but raised concerns about its accuracy. She shared an experiment where AI-generated false citations, highlighting the importance of cross-checking information. Saana supported this view, emphasizing the need for critical thinking when using AI-driven cultural tools.

Elina also expressed fascination with reconstructions but stressed the importance of using AI responsibly. She warned that relying on incomplete or biased datasets could result in misrepresentations of history or culture. Despite these concerns, she and Simon agreed that technologies like VR and AI could revolutionize cultural engagement if applied thoughtfully.

4. Conclusion: Bridging the real and virtual worlds

The discussion revealed a shared belief among the students: while digital technologies offer incredible opportunities for self-expression, relationships, and cultural exploration, they cannot fully replace the richness of the physical world. As Mikołaj aptly put it, the key is balance—integrating online and offline experiences to complement each other.

The digital world holds immense potential, from avatars that enable bold self-expression to VR reconstructions that bring history to life. However, as these students demonstrate, the essence of being human lies in navigating this landscape with thoughtfulness, blending the best of both worlds to create meaningful, balanced lives.



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