

## Avatars and the Extension of the Self

As technology becomes increasingly integrated into everyday life, the self becomes more and more “digitalized”; communication is filtered through cell-phones, text messages, instant messaging, and virtual worlds, and each of these forms of communication have developed nuances that the recipient of messages often use to determine mood and personality of the sender. Often, and especially in the context of the cyberworld, these virtual identities are contained in what is known as an “avatar”. Forms of avatars range from the icon on an online discussion forum to the graphical representations of users as seen in games like World of Warcraft. However, as Meadows puts it in his book *I, Avatar*, an avatar is, essentially, “an interactive, social representation of a user” (Meadows 13). Like our own bodies, avatars offer us a means of exploring an environment and interacting with other bodies, but unlike that of our own bodies, the perspective of the self in a virtual world is that of an outsider. Thus, when playing online games that use graphical avatars, we are constantly both the actor and the audience in whatever work of virtual fiction we choose to reside in. But because of the unique perspective of the self the avatar allows us, an examination of the avatar will provide insight on how we think of our physical bodies; first, that our bodies are extensible, second, that our skin is essential to the process of building identity, and finally, that we desire a real sense of touch in any interaction with others, real or fictional.

Two important terminologies used in this study are referred to as Body One and Body Two. By Body One and Body Two we refer to Idhe’s definitions of the twinned sense of the body; Body One is “the perceiving, active, oriented being-a-body from

which we experience the world around us” (Idhe 69) while Body Two is “the cultural or socially constructed body” (Idhe 70). In other words, Body One is, while not the object-body itself, the sense of embodiment we develop by actively being in a world – it is the sense of boundary between the self and the environment. When one turns to the side to shuffle through a narrow passageway, the Body One is at work. Body Two, on the other hand, is the sense of being attached to social and cultural markers by which one can be identified (such markers being age, gender, geographical location, etc.); it is the sense of boundary between self and other bodies. It is “the body upon which is written or signified the various possible meanings of politics, culture, the socius” (Idhe 70).

With these terms in mind, we see, firstly, that avatar-human interaction reveals a stretching of embodiment into the virtual world. This is due to the way the avatar so well propagates the actions we, ourselves, take to solve problems and accomplish goals. Not only do we actively use avatars to accomplish personal objectives (gaining one more level, finishing an in-game quest, dealing with social situations), we also tend to relate to the graphical “person” we see on-screen. Our brains have something called mirror neurons, which allow you to identify with another person’s actions, specifically those actions which are goal oriented (Meadows 89). In other words, if you watch someone perform a familiar action, these mirror neurons fire as they would if you were doing the action yourself. In this way, the gap between reality and fiction is bridged, at least psychologically. When you watch your on-screen avatar pick up a rock, to your mind, it really is you picking up that rock. Due to the wiring of our natural brains, our sense of

interaction with the environment – our Body One -- is extended into the virtual world, and we find ourselves pretending to perceive as the avatar does.

Avatars are, thus, a prosthetic that allows us to control our sense of virtual embodiment and the virtual space we take up. It teleports our psyche much like a prosthetic ear – a telephone – does; it puts us “next” to people who are far away, extending the reach of our embodiment. The way this happens can be compared to the way we extend ourselves into any vehicle through which we accomplish goals. When one gets rear-ended while driving, one is more apt to say “He hit me!” rather than “He hit my car!” Mention of the engine, the metal plates that make up the car’s body, and the rubber tires are bypassed; these helping aspects of the car merely become direct appendages to our own bodies – the engine muscle power, the metal plates a skin, and the tires rapidly running feet. As the artist Stelarc asserts (as reported by Benthien), “in cyberspace, finally, the body need not end where its own skin ends... Until now the surface of the skin has been the place where the world begins and the self simultaneously ends... But now it is expanded and rendered permeable by technology” (Benthien 229). Not only is the body extensible, but such extension – such liberation from corporeality – is seen to be desired. We might attribute the increasing popularity of online games to this idea.

Perhaps more obvious in the virtual context is the extension of Body Two. The internet is often praised for its ability to “connect” people despite distance. Due to the anonymity and lack of physical presence it provides, and the fact that behavior is guided by socio-cultural markers, the online world literally becomes a mass of Body Twos interacting. An interesting question asked to 300 people by Meadows was “Can sin be committed via your avatar?” 150 answered yes, and 150 answered no (Meadows 78).

While we reach into and manipulate the virtual world at will, the capability of consequences of those actions to affect us in the real world still seems to be a debated point.

Secondly, avatar-human interaction reveals the fact that we depend on our skin – the outer layer of our bodies – to shape our identity in whatever way we like. “Skin”, as Benthien puts it, “is fundamental in establishing identity, for it identifies the individual like a name” (Benthien 95); skin and the self equate, and thus, how we choose to paint over our skin reveals what sort of portrait and depiction of self we want to convey. Skin as a medium of self-expression is not a new concept; tattoos, piercings, and make-up are common ways we decorate our skin. Similarly, we paint a portrait of our online identity through our avatar, the representation of ourselves as others see it, as we build and add to it. In fact, the very design of the avatar betrays the necessity we place on being able to decorate the skin. Similarly to the way Idhe’s Body One and Body Two are both “developed” and “constructed”, the entire mechanical concept of the avatar revolves around the idea of “building” – in Second Life, users are able to customize nearly every aspect of their avatar and create custom items for the avatar to wear and use, and in fantasy role playing online games, while avatars’ appearances are not completely customizable, the avatar’s attributes (such as strength, dexterity, agility, intelligence) and the combat skills the avatar gets to learn are completely up to the user. In online forums, one is able to change one’s icon image at any time. Wearable items in graphical online games are also a primary means of building an avatar, and can be compared to the socio-cultural markings of Idhe’s Body Two. For example, wearing the Kitsune Mask in the

game Ragnarok Online either meant that one was powerful enough to defeat 100 instances of the monster known as Nine-Tails that was located at the bottom of a difficult dungeon area, or that one was wealthy enough to purchase this very valuable headgear. In either scenario, the Kitsune Mask serves as a *marking* of accomplishment and as a measure of prowess, which, notably, only has meaning in a social context such as that of an online game. Furthermore, to lose such an item due to some virtual catastrophe such as the crashing of the system's item database would, without a doubt, instigate an emotional reaction from the player. The value of the avatar lies not in and of itself, but in its ability to possess and to grow. But while scars are attached to the skin and become permanently part of who we are, in the virtual world, like a surgical operation, markings of memory can be removed and reattached on a whim.

In fantasy role playing games, the appearance of one's character lends itself towards being interpreted as a certain type of role based on socially and culturally agreed upon archetypes. A magic-user uses long, flowing robes and uses a staff of some sort as a weapon of choice, while a warrior wears heavy armor and carries a huge sword or ax. For a user to say to everyone he meets "I am a warrior character" would be silly and redundant; the character's appearance says it all. In-game roles are a big part of an avatar's identity and heavily influence how the player plays the game and thus, how he interacts with others; a healer has a drastically different role in a group of characters than an archer does. Just as in waking life one may be a wife, brother, friend, or employee, in an online game, a player might be a knight, healer, rogue, or merchant, and similarly to the way one may choose certain clothes to wear based on a desire to look "business-like", "classy", or "casual", making use of these archetypes encourage certain judgments based

on appearance. Note again, however, that this method of identity building and even skin itself would be rendered useless in the absence of a social environment. Identity, then, is not attached solely to the self but exists by continually bouncing against others' perceptions.

Not only does identity-building through avatars reflect how we build identity in the real world, it is inextricably connected to it. For players who uses more than one avatar (and the number of players who do this is many), each avatar can be seen as a thread that represents a portion of the player's personality. For example, during my time playing on Ragnarok Online, I played as an assassin class character named "-jojo-". But I also had numerous other characters, including a blonde-haired blacksmith, a red-haired swordsman, and an acolyte-healer class that I did not play as very often. There were certain things I liked and did not like about playing each character, and being able to see myself from so many different perspectives actually let me learn about why I act the way I do. The assassin satisfied my preference for playing fast-paced games, but I disliked having to take the extra effort to find and buy equipment to strengthen such an inherently weak character class. The swordsman, though slow, dealt heavy damage with each attack and was relatively simple to play, as it did not need a particularly special set of equipment and skills to be effective. Though I had long played as an assassin class, the swordsman quickly became my favorite character. Playing as a healer was simply boring for me. I disliked a position of support and found that I would rather be playing as a character that would create direct results. Though I no longer play online games, I still find similarities between the way I played Ragnarok Online and the way I approach other activities. For example, when writing academic papers, I spend time simplifying the

paper's structure and avoid discussion of complex arguments that have a small chance of concluding solidly; I take a "swordsmen's" attitude toward it. As the avatar is a prosthetic to the self, it unavoidably has some bearing on the identity it works under, and, as in this case, may even be useful as a tool for self-examination.

Does this mean that the avatar and the self are one and the same? As Meadows recounts the commercialization of Second Life, "These companies herded in, built islands, made little shops on the islands, and piled little virtual shirts and shoes and cars and laptop computers on the virtual shelves for sale. Then they logged out and watched the news and thought, 'If you build it, they will come'" (Meadows 65). When experiencing things in game, we interact with the proposed identity, not that of the human – but that does not make these interactive experiences any less real. But these attempts by companies like Dell, American Apparel, and Sears to make money were not successful; as Meadows puts it, "After all, a Jean-Paul Gaultier shirt isn't so interesting when you're used to wearing a jet pack" (Meadows 65). The avatar is able to transcend limits of normal human life and thus has separate wants and needs.

Lastly, the simultaneity of touch is recognized as essential and desired. Benthien reports to us De Kerckhove's words that "every interactive system between the body and machine is a variation of the ability to touch and let oneself be touched" (Benthien 231), and game controllers are no exception. Their obvious role is to allow a player to control their in-game body by way of joysticks and buttons. However, many controllers also come with a rumble-pack feature, which makes the controller vibrate according to in-game events, such as when an earthquake is shaking the floor the character is standing on.

This is was seen as a breakthrough when the idea first emerged; ever since the introduction of the Rumble Pak to the Nintendo64 in 1997, force feedback vibration has become a standard feature in almost every home video game console controller. No longer was touch in a video game context one-way; players could now touch the system's environment and, if only in a limited way, perceive a sense of touch back.

It is this total simultaneity of performed and experienced touch that utopian designs of cyberspace seek, for this allows the distinction between the toucher and the touched to become blurred as it is when one physically touches another's skin (Benthien 229). In Benthien, the boundary that is being abolished is between that of the touching human and the touched human, but this idea can also be extended to that of between the body of the human and the body of the avatar, resulting in the melding of two experiences into one, or the transport and extension of our sense of Body One. There is already of sense of media experiences being authentic (you are, after all, interacting with real others while online), but the synchronization of what is considered the most corporeal sense with that of the avatar is the final ingredient needed to justify the word "Reality" in "Virtual Reality". Apparently, we link authenticity with the sense of being able to feel material.

An examination of avatar-human interaction reveals the extension capabilities of our embodiment, the way we build our identity using appearance, and the way we link reality with a sense of touch. The avatar forces us to watch our bodies – the virtual as well as the real – from the outside, and we see that the way each of the discussed aspects of embodiment affect and reflect our interactions with others indicates the skin's role in



identity building. The inherent archivability of digital documents does not lose its usefulness when talking about virtual bodies; digitalizing the self creates space from which one can participate in inspection and thus, introspection. Therefore, though fictional, the virtual body does not represent the degradation of the body but an appreciation for it. Imitation is, after all, the best form of flattery.

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