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## **Personal identity and the Massively Multiplayer Online World**

### Abstract

This paper explores the implications that the construction and use of avatars in games such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft* have for our understanding of personal identity. It asks whether the avatar can meaningfully be experienced as a separate person, existing in parallel to the flesh and blood player. A rehearsal of Cartesian and Lockean accounts of personal identity constructs an understanding of the self that is challenged by the experience of online play. It will be argued that playful engagement in virtual worlds invites the participant to reflect upon the human being as embodied and social; qualities of which are marginalised by Descartes and Locke. The strangeness of this experience of virtual worlds confronts the player with a challenge to construct a coherent narrative of online life, of which treating the avatar as a separate person is a coherent option. This opens up the virtual world as an important space within which personal identity is explored, but one with complex implications for our understanding of what counts as reasonable and ethical behaviour.

Key words: Narrative; Personhood; *Second Life*; Virtual Reality; *World of Warcraft*.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to ask in what sense, if any, play within computer games might serve to constitute a 'person' who is separate and distinct from any offline personhood. It will be argued that, while play does not necessitate the constitution of a different self or person, play does pose a challenge to the player, inviting them to reflect upon the nature of personhood, and to construct a coherent narrative that places the often intense, alien and emotionally powerful experiences gained through playing in relationship to one's offline, flesh and blood, self.

Of particular concern is the experience of participation within what are known as 'Massively Multiplayer Online Games' (MMOG) or 'Worlds' (MMOW). These are characterised by the simultaneous participation of large numbers of players, facilitated through the internet, in a virtual environment. The terms 'game' and 'world' may be used to distinguish those environments in which the players are set specific tasks and goals ('games') from those that allow players merely to interact and thus to determine their own purposes and pursuits, and that typically allow some degree of freedom in building the virtual environment ('worlds'). MMOGs, having objectives that are constituted through the rules of the game, and may be understood as ludic. MMOWs, in contrast, are more simply playful or paidiaic (Pearce, 2009 p. 28). Whether ludic or paidiaic, both encourage rich and complex narrative understandings of the virtual environment and one's fellow players in order to participate. The best known of MMOGs is perhaps *World of Warcraft* (WoW), and the best known MMOW may be *Second Life* (SL).<sup>i</sup>

It has been long argued in the literature on computer games and virtual reality that MMOGs and MMOWs disrupt traditional ideas and experiences of personal identity (see Turkle 1995, pp.177-209). This is due to the fact that one participates in such virtual environments through an avatar, which is to say a virtual representation or proxy for the player. Because the avatar need not share the same physical, social or even psychological qualities as those of the player, it has been suggested that the avatar, and thus the online or virtual 'self', is a distinct person from that of the flesh and blood player at the computer key board.

The nature of online personhood has been posed largely within a literature framed by sociology and ethnography or cultural studies, with little reference to philosophy (see Childs 2011). While this has led to the gathering of significant empirical evidence on players' psychological and cultural experiences of MMOGs and MMOWs, core concepts in the argument, such as 'self', 'person', 'identity', 'personality', and 'character' are frequently left vague, and the focus of analysis shifts uneasily. Thus, a claimed multiplicity of selves may, in fact, on the evidence and arguments given, amount more properly to differences between the player's inworld and offline personalities. The purpose of this paper is therefore to offer a more disciplined analysis of the appeal to 'personhood' made in attempts to understand the experience of virtual play.

Contemporary accounts of virtual reality, under the significant influence of Turkle (1995), tend to appeal to sociological role theory, and under the influence of continental philosophy, accept that there is no strict personal identity. This paper will strive to bridge this use of role theory, by linking its most relevant representative, Erving Goffman, back to early modern philosophical accounts of personhood (from Descartes (1998) and Locke (1996, pp. 133-149)) through the arguments of Mead and Merleau-Ponty. Descartes and Locke set up a number of crucial issues concerning personal identity, and ground much debate within both the continental and analytic traditions of philosophy. Mead, Merleau-Ponty and Goffman, in contrast to many analytic theorists, offer resources that are at once sympathetic to contemporary video games theory, while allowing a deeper analysis of what is at stake in the question of personhood.

The paper will proceed by offering an introduction to the nature and experience of play

within virtual worlds before briefly outlining contemporary accounts of selfhood and role-play within virtual worlds. The issue of personal identity will then be explored through Descartes, Lockes, Merleau-Ponty and Goffman, in order to suggest that the experiences of play within a virtual world may be so anomalous to offline experiences as to require radical solutions for their coherent and meaningful interpretation. Examples of these interpretations will be offered in the penultimate section, focusing on the importance of what will be termed 'augmentationist' and 'immersionist' accounts. Concluding remarks will reflect upon the moral importance of virtual play.

## Avatars

The challenge that virtual reality poses for personal identity or selfhood arises most obviously from the nature of the avatar.<sup>ii</sup> Depending on the precise rules and programming of the world, the player may select an avatar that differs from their flesh and blood body in terms of species (e.g. orc, vampire, furry), gender, age and ethnicity. The avatar may differ in such physical attributes as height, weight, muscularity and hair colour. The avatar may use a wheel chair and the flesh and blood player not, or vice versa. The flesh and blood player may be Jewish, the avatar atheist, animist or Muslim. Perhaps even more radically, in many worlds the avatar may be continually tweaked and modified, or the player may cycle between different appearances (by changing 'skins' and 'shapes'). The avatar thereby becomes potentially highly fluid, in its appearance, allegiances and behavioural traits.

The peculiarity of the relationship between player and avatar is nicely expressed in Estes' account of his *SL* avatar Enos Andel: 'I first met Enos at a meet-and-greet, which was hectic and not conducive to getting to know him.' Apparently Enos 'didn't look exactly the way I imagined he would look – close, yes, but not exactly. Enos was about medium height, of average build with a little bit of extra weight from spending too much time in virtual worlds' (2009, p. 77). Estes experiences Enos as a separate person, to be encountered, not made or manipulated. Estes' description also suggests something of the intensity of emotional involvement that participation in a virtual world may involve. The player is typically drawn into complex and demanding emotional relationships, both in terms of the life of the avatar itself, and crucially through the avatar's relationships to others (see for example Boellstorff (2008, pp. 151-178) on 'intimacy' in *SL*).

Turkle, in accounts that continue to ground much theorising of virtual play, suggests that the online presence of the avatar allows people to 'build a self by cycling through many selves' (1995, p. 178). The very term 'self' is vague. Turkle also refers to avatars as 'virtual personae' (1995 p. 180; 1999 pp. 643-4), and thus akin to the masks through which Greek actors spoke. If this image is fair, then the avatar is no more a different self than an actor's mask or even a character played. It will not displace or subsume the personhood of the flesh and blood player.. More subtly, however, Turkle presents the avatar as a parallel exploration of different 'aspects' of the self (1999 p. 643). The player uses the avatar as a means for exploring aspirations, frustrations and even physiological problems and inhibitions (1995, pp. 186-196). Turkle quotes interviewees remarking how different online presences allow them to embody different 'moods' or to 'bring out different things in me' (1999 p. 643), or even, through different avatars to 'turn different parts of my mind on and off' (1997, p. 74). Other of Turkle's interviewees describe how their behaviour, attitudes, and thus personality differ between the different online identities they use (1995, p. 179). Some feel more themselves online, where the avatar is an ideal self (1995 p. 179). This begins to suggest that there is not a single correct understanding of the relationship of the flesh and blood player to the avatar. Different players will understand their avatars, and cope with the emotional intensity of the experience of play, differently. My concern here, then, is to understand the challenge to which these players are responding, and thus to assess the coherence and profundity of different responses.

Turkle herself theorises the avatar through a radical extension of social role theory. Thus, in social life, the competent human agent occupies different socially defined roles each day. As Turkle puts this, 'one wakes up as a lover, makes breakfast as a mother, and drives to work as a lawyer' (1999, p. 644). In each role one's behaviour is governed by different rules and norms. These will make different demands in terms of one's priorities, motivations, and behavioural patterns. The modern computer radicalises this process, in so far as the computer allows a number of windows to be open simultaneously. Each window may demand the occupation of the different social role in order to use it properly. Here one might consider having one's work email, Facebook, and a game open together. Turkle's point is that prior to the computer, social roles were occupied in sequence. With the computer they are occupied in parallel, by a what Turkle calls a 'distributed self' (1999 p. 644). It is precisely here that the important philosophical questions lie. MMOWs make possible play with the distributed self. That is to say that while participating in an MMOW (or MMOG) one is aware that one is playing a game, constituted by its rules. As such the game is segregated from non-play 'real' life. Play allows experimentation that may be relevant to 'real' virtual experiences (such as the use of social networking sites), and crucially, for my current concern, invites the player to reflect upon who they are while in the virtual world, and how the avatar-person relates to their flesh and blood self.

### Role-Playing and the Self

Relationships between players and their avatars are highly diverse. While some players will indeed see avatars as alternative selves, others will see them as mere playing pieces necessary to participation in a game.

The nature of the game is significant. In most video games (where the player is simply engaging with the computer and not interacting with other human agents), an avatar is provided by the game. It is little more than a tool that facilitates game playing. Thus Bainbridge's note, that in playing SuperMario, his daughters do not identify with an Italian plumber (2010 p. 187) is hardly surprising. It does not undermine the possibility that there is something more subtle going on in other forms of game or world. Perhaps more surprising is Geraci's claim that people identify with (or at least have an 'ardent desire to play with') certain *Monopoly* pieces (2014, p 67). Geraci is attempting to highlight emotional identification with the avatar. Yet, while I might have an aesthetic or superstitious preference for a shoe over a top hat, the role of a playing piece in a game such as *Monopoly* is fundamentally different to that of the avatar in an MMOG. It was noted above that MMOGs and MMOWs typically entail rich narratives. The *Monopoly* playing piece is unlikely to have a part in the unfolding of such a narrative or the consequent building of characters. That is to suggest that, while the self who plays *Monopoly* may have emotional attachments to, and even a narrative that makes sense of their preference for, a given piece, the piece does not contribute to a narrative that unfolds within the particular game of *Monopoly*. The piece does not suggest a character or persona which the game may be about. The *Monopoly* playing piece does not therefore encourage me to play or narrate the particular game through a character.

In *Cluedo* playing pieces are given human names and titles. While different pieces, such as Miss Scarlet or Professor Green, yield slightly different tactical possibilities, the *Cluedo* player no more identifies with their piece than does Bainbridge with Mario. While the playing piece may now suggest a character, a game of *Cluedo* makes few narrative demands upon the players, and as such does not encourage the player to play through the persona of their playing piece. Ultimately, *Cluedo* merely presents a logical problem to be solved, and different playing pieces do not encourage different styles of play. A more telling example may be the video game *Mass Effect*. Here players, for the first time in video gaming, could choose between male and female versions of the character (Commander Sheppard) through which the game is

played. For a male to play as the female Sheppard, or vice versa, begins to pose the challenge of the MMOW avatar. The avatar can be chosen to be different to the flesh and blood player, and playing in that character, crucially constructing and interpreting the narrative of the game through (what the player understands to be) female rather than male eyes, may lead to different tactics, not least in a game that encourages the player to build a distinctive moral personality as they play (see Lavigne 2015). Thus, the choice of avatar is not merely the choice of an aesthetically pleasing playing-piece. It becomes rather an invitation to construct a narrative as one plays the game, and thus to unfold the avatar as a coherent character, with a distinctive personality and moral (and indeed tactical) preferences. A profound and serious response to this invitation, through the construction of a coherent character, will mediate the way in which the game is played.

The virtual world radicalises the experience of a game such as *Mass Effect*. The avatar that represents the player, as noted above, may be bespoke, rather than selected from a limited number of options. More significantly, perhaps, the virtual world invites a certain form of role-play. The nature of role-play is complex and subtle (see Bainbridge 2010, p. 6), but for the purposes of this analysis a contrast may be drawn between role-play and occupation of social roles. In the example of social roles given above (lover, mother, lawyer), each role is governed by social rules. Different societies will facilitate different roles, different role combinations (so that, for example, to be able to be both a mother and a lawyer is a historical recent achievement), and different ways of performing any given role. However, for much of the time the role will be played as if it is natural. The competent social agent does not need to be conscious of the rules they are following, and indeed is most likely to be aware of them only as they are broken or violated. The social role becomes second nature. In contrast, it is in the nature of a game that players are aware that they are playing it. Games are constituted by their rules, and a player must consciously learn those rules before acquiring any facility in play (Suits 2005).<sup>iii</sup> While the experienced player may internalise the game's rules, so that rules approach the condition of second nature, the rule-book remains a document to which all players know that they can and sometimes must refer in order to clarify the legality and coherence of play. The avatar thereby comes to be understood, by the player, as governed by the conventional rules of the game. There is something alienated about the avatar, precisely insofar as it is constituted by rules that do not apply offline. This moment of alienation entails that anything experienced through the avatar is potentially disruptive of the player's mundane expectations of what counts as meaningful behaviour or action.

MMOWs, such as *SL*, further confuse this relationship. A 'world' invites its participants to enter into suspiciously mundane social interaction. The participant need not occupy explicit fantasy roles, or roles structured for the pursuit of ludic goals, the narrative back stories of which the player must deliberately learn. Rather, they occupy social roles that are borrowed from or mimic the offline world, such as lover, mother, entrepreneur, or worshipper. How to participate in such roles is already known to the competent social agent. A world, in contrast to a pure game, thus blurs the distinction between that which is explicitly and self-consciously conventional, constituted by and for the game, and that which is second nature. Put otherwise, a 'world' at once encourages the participant to forget that they are participating in an environment that has been constituted through the designing and invoking of conventional rules, and yet as a rule-constituted artificial environment continues to engender disruptive experiences. The vampire, lover and merchant must all alike manage the tension between the mundane and the alien.

This is to suggest that as games acquire the complexity, subtlety and emotional involvement of worlds, the challenge to construct the avatar as a coherent character, and to allow that character to mediate life within the virtual world, becomes at once more pressing and demanding. In part, this pressure arises from the fact that the player is now interacting, not with computer generated opponents, but with other human beings. The MMOW is a genuinely

social and intersubjective environment. This environment, again to emphasize a point already made, may be intensely emotionally affecting (see Blascovich & Bailenson 2011), and actions may have serious moral consequences, for they impact upon other humans. It is this playful environment, I am proposing, that invites reflection upon the nature of the self, as an embodied, interactive being.

### Personal identity (Descartes and Locke)

The player will not necessarily bring to the virtual world a developed theory of the self, although the profiles that *SL* invites the player to make available to other residents does ask for both inworld and 'real world' biographies, thus already allowing the narrative of the two 'selves' to be distinguished. The issue of the player's relationship to their avatar is one upon which players reflect, and with which they often struggle. In this section, I will outline the account of personal identity proposed in early-modern philosophy as a proxy of a starting point for lay understandings of the self, before linking this to a more philosophically penetrating account, and one that embraces role theory, in the following sections.

Descartes and Locke provide two key articulations of the problem of personal identity. While Descartes articulates a sophisticated metaphysical defence of what might be regarded as the common sense assumption that the identity of the person is something strict, unitary and inviolable, Locke begins to open the possibility that personhood is a construct and potentially plural. It may be suggested that Descartes' metaphysics responds to an intuition that human beings ought to have a single identity over their lifetimes. Locke responds more to the conscious experience of that identity, not least in memory. Experiences that disrupt the Cartesian intuition, and virtual reality is one of these experiences, are unsettling and invite a response.

Descartes' indubitable maxim, 'I think therefore I am' (1998, p. 18), lies at the core of his account of personal identity. The 'I' knows that it exists because it thinks. Even to doubt its own existence entails an act of thought, and thus the very existence of the thinker that is supposedly being brought into question. Descartes posits a thinking substance (as distinct from the extended, physical substance that constitutes the material world and the human body) that guarantees the existence and identity of the person. This substance exists independently of the body and is unchanging during and beyond the body's mortal existence. The person is therefore the single, unified and unchanging substance, within which all psychological experience inheres. While Descartes is well aware that changes to the physical body (such as ageing, illness and drunkenness) do impact upon a human's psychological states, and thus moods and attitudes, they do not change the identity of the person. The experience of playing an avatar online will not thus impact upon identity, and nor will it be a separate identity, for the experience of play necessarily inheres in the thinking substance of the flesh and blood player.

Locke's empiricist response to Descartes throws into question the coherence of the idea of a soul substance, not least because it is not something that can be experienced independently of the accidental properties, which is to say psychological events such as thoughts, emotions and memories, that inhere in it.<sup>iv</sup> Identity for Locke is thus something that must be experienced as such, and crucially through the continuity of memory (1996, Bk II, section xxvii, 10). He suggests that neither reincarnation nor the transmigration of souls are incompatible with Cartesian metaphysics, but that if so there are ambiguities in the Cartesian account. If a soul substance were to be reincarnated, but upon reincarnation lose all memory of its previous life, it would, for Descartes, still be the same person, albeit in a possibly very different body and with a different psychology (just as the online person and the avatar are the same, regardless of differences in body and psychology).<sup>v</sup> Similarly, the soul substance could migrate between bodies (and Locke offers the story of the prince and the pauper). Here the soul retains its memory of life in the old body. While Locke is sceptical of any justification regarding a

reincarnated soul having retained the identity of the person, he accepts, precisely because of the continuity of memory, that the transmigrated soul could retain that identity. Thus, Locke separates bodily identity from the psychologically grounded identity of the person, as does Descartes, but only on the ground that psychological continuity is empirically experienced (rather than being a metaphysical postulate). Indeed, it may be suggested that one has, for Locke, to constitute one's identity through an act of recall. The self, as a unified and singular entity is constructed by drawing together the existing strands of memory. The Lockean self thus opens the way to thinking of personhood as something constructed through narrative. Put otherwise, the intuition that personal identity ought to be strict entails that anomalous experiences pose the challenge of constructing a coherent and meaningful narrative that accounts for the anomaly. The self thereby comes to exist as the narrative coherence of remembered events (see Ricoeur 1991).

More radically, this opens Locke to the possibility that the personal identity of a human being is fragmentary during their lifetime. Again, put otherwise, it may not be possible to construct a single unified narrative from known events. Amnesia, for example, seemingly cuts the thread of identity. Thus, if when drunk a human commits crimes that they do not remember when sober, they are not, for Locke, strictly responsible for those acts, or at least should not be punished, for the punishment must be felt by the person who remembers committing the crime, and that person ceased to exist with the onset of sobriety (1996, Bk II, section xxvii, 6 & 20). Thus, while Cartesian personal identity is impervious to the effects that alcohol might have, not merely on memory, but also upon psychology (and thus an agent's intentions, moods and motivations), the Lockean person is potentially fragmented by it. The human drunk is a different person to the human sober. The activities of the drunk cannot be absorbed into the narrative of the sober person. This begins to hint at a sense in which the avatar online might be a different person to the offline player, for the avatar's experience, behaviour and motivations may be so anomalous as to not easily find a place in the narrative of the flesh and blood player. However, Locke demands a clear rupture of memory. Merely logging into a computer program does not erase the player's offline memories (and nor does logging out erase memory of the online world). A certain narrative ingenuity should facilitate integration of the avatar's activities into the personal narrative of the flesh and blood player. As such, early modern accounts of personal identity seem to leave little plausibility in the claims of contemporary theorists that the 'distributed self' is in any way genuinely constitutive of plural identities.

### Personal Identity (Merleau-Ponty)

There are two fundamental weaknesses in Descartes' and Locke's account of the person, and addressing these will serve to open up the possibility that the avatar may, legitimately, be experienced as a different person to the player. Firstly, neither account of personal identity recognises the importance of embodiment. Secondly, neither recognises that humans are social beings, necessarily interacting with others. The implications of these criticisms for understanding personhood in virtual reality may be explored in turn.

For both Descartes and Locke the body is something fundamentally separate from the mind.. The body is something the person has. For Locke it is, indeed, the logically most primitive form of property. This dualism is challenged by Merleau-Ponty (2005). A distinction may be made between 'having a body' and 'being a body'. To treat the body as a possession is to objectify it. It is a tool through which one interacts with the physical world. This objectification may be legitimate, for example when the body is injured and thus inhibits everyday movement and activity. However, for Merleau-Ponty, one is primarily one's body. The body is not experienced as another object in the world, but is rather the medium through which other objects are experienced. The body mediates the way in which one perceives the



world, and not, as Locke and Descartes might themselves acknowledge, simply because of the limitations or quirks of eye sight, hearing and touch. It is rather that the physical capability of the body will shape how objects are understood as part of a meaningful world. For a strong and well co-ordinated ten year old a tree might be an object of adventure, to be climbed. To the less agile but more technically skilled adult, it may be a source of timber. The tree is never simply a physical object, but always a meaningful structure of possibilities. This structure emerges from the co-ordination of the body with the world around it. The body and world thus function as an integrated and meaningful whole, and do so because the body frames the meaning the agent can ascribe to the world.

As explored above, MMOGs and MMOWs offer a virtual embodiment that can be different to that of the player's flesh and blood experience. The paralytic can walk; the heavy person become slender; and the uncoordinated become fluent and elegant in their movements. As such, the virtual body may not be something that the player has, as a mere playing-piece through which they interact with the game. Rather, it is that through which they experience the virtual world. The body is the transcendental condition of possibility of a meaningful world, and a world that is full of opportunities that are denied to the flesh and blood person.<sup>vi</sup>

As this argument stands, it does not yet offer enough to suggest the possibility of the avatar as a separate self. It may be constitutive of action within the alien virtual world, but that world is still, ultimately, experienced through the flesh and blood body of the player. Turning to the social interactionism and role-theory that informs contemporary work of MMOWs may offer a more radical account of human selfhood that opens the possibility of the avatar being interpreted as a distinct self.

#### Personal Identity (Mead and Goffman)

The second criticism of Cartesian and Lockean accounts of personal identity is that they are asocial. This criticism has two related aspects. Firstly, they fail to recognise that the human agent comes to conscious always already within society, interacting with other human beings. Secondly, both Descartes and Locke treat personal identity exclusively from within, which is to say, as a first person psychological experience (of thinking or remembering). As a social being the person is also judged to be such from without. Others identify the object before them as an embodied person, and re-identify that body as the same person they encountered previously.

The tradition of symbolic interactionism offers a response to Descartes' and Locke's failings. The fundamental claim here is that only through alter's recognition of ego as a person will ego's identity coalesce sufficiently for it to achieve self-consciousness. This is to argue that consciousness of oneself as a person is not a given, as Descartes assumes, but rather an achievement, the possibility of which presupposes access to appropriate social resources in order to be realised appropriately. Thus, Mead argues that one's self-consciousness develops only as one comes to see oneself as others see you (1934, p. 135). What Mead describes as the 'me', which is to say the self as an object of conscious reflection, is necessarily a social self. Self-consciousness presupposes that one internalises the judgemental gaze of the other. In so doing, one internalises not merely an individual's perception, but rather the social structure of which that individual is a part. The other is an occupant of a social role, and thus one internalises the relevant structure of social roles. This suggests, akin to Merleau-Ponty's arguments concerning embodiment, that different social structures will lead to differently structured selves, and thus, potentially, different persons.

Mead is not arguing for social determinism. While he rejects the simple, existentialist or libertarian, autonomy that can be found in Locke, he argues that the agent, or 'I', will still actively and creatively respond to the 'me' (1934, p. 175). The 'I' has a degree of freedom to

interpret the social situation (or world) in which it finds itself. There is therefore a space, in Mead's model, for human autonomy (albeit a freedom that is at once made possible and constrained by the social embeddedness of the agent), and the possibility that the 'I' has an on-going identity that the 'me' lacks. As such, the Cartesian might readily argue that it is the 'I' that is the true source of personal identity, and not the fragmentary 'me'. Yet the 'I' is known only retrospectively. It cannot be captured in the moment of its action, but only as its actions and choices are recalled. The 'I', considered independently of any concrete world, is thus a mere abstraction, lacking substance. Again, this suggests that the self as 'I' may have a Cartesian metaphysical status. Yet it escapes experience and thus stands, in effect, as little more than an expression of the intuitive aspiration to strict personal identity. To be known and thus to be a substantial agent presupposes, as Locke argues, construction in memory. Substantial agency is necessarily the narratively constructed 'me'.

Mead's analysis already hints at a challenge: to bring the fragmentary experience of the 'me' together into a unified and coherent narrative, and thus respond to the intuitive desire for the identity of the 'I'. It is precisely this challenge, it is being argued, that play in virtual reality poses. Mead's work on play, and specifically role-play (1934, pp. 152ff) is significant here. He presents role-play as a mechanism through which the emerging self learns to internalise the perceptions of others. Mead's point is that, in role-play, one learns not simply one's own role, but crucially the roles of others, and the structural relationships that they have to one's own. In entering an MMOG, as an already well-formed and competent social agent, one is not learning, but rather playing with the process of becoming self-conscious. The conventionality of the rules of the game entail that MMOG is, in part at least, a play with personal identity. The very fragmentariness, flux and strangeness of the avatar and virtual world pose a playful problem for narrative construction. As such, it may be suggested, in constructing an avatar and entering into social interactions with other avatars, the player is being invited to constitute a 'person' that, in order to take account of the alien nature of its embodied and social experience, may be distinct from the one that has been constituted in the offline world.

This argument may be developed through reference to Erving Goffman. Goffman offers an elegant development of the Meadian position, and one that has a significant influence on the study of virtual reality (see Bainbridge 2010, p. 174). While Mead's account of the internalisation of social roles suggests a somewhat passive and automatic process, Goffman stresses the active engagement of the competent human agent in shaping, and thus presenting, themselves to the gaze of others. Within a given social situation, the agent modifies their behaviour, forms of communication, appearance and demeanour. Thus, in the dining room, in Goffman's classic example (1956, pp. 72-4), the waiter is elegant and polite; in the kitchen, they relax, joke with the cook, allow their appearance and posture to slip. Goffman's point is not that agents cynically manipulate their appearance and behaviour to their own advantage (although the con-artist can indeed do this). Rather, the agent is facilitating the smooth functioning of the social situation. An elegant waiter enhances the diners' experience as well as securing a better tip. Further, the simple manipulation of others is limited by the fact that this presentation will be interpreted and evaluated, freely and perhaps unpredictably, by the others one encounters. The meaning and worth of the presentation, and thus exactly the sort of person one is, becomes a matter of negotiation and social construction. Crucially, as Mead suggested with the internalisation of the perception of the other, personhood is known not simply from within, but judged and interpreted by third parties.

Virtual worlds such as *SL* play, thematically, with this process of presentation. As has been noted above, the appearance of the avatar can be manipulated and modified in fine detail. In addition the avatar can be given poses, gestures and movements that enhance the presentation. Textual statements can also be made available to others that allow further description, expression or qualification of the avatar's self-image. On one level, the avatar then becomes the body through which one experiences the virtual world. But, to go beyond the account

derived from Merleau-Ponty above, this is not simply a physical body. It is rather a social body, that will be interpreted and evaluated by those who encounter it. The avatar thus constitutes a virtual world, and acts in it, through the internalisation and negotiation of the gaze of the other. The self and world are thus reciprocally constituted intersubjectively and imaginatively.

The question remains as to whether Goffmanian selves are genuinely different persons, or merely expressions of a single person. Two interpretations may be offered of Goffman. In one, which is probably Goffman's self-interpretation, he retains the person as a 'ghostly "I" standing outside society' (MacIntyre 2007, p. 32). This reinforces the idea of the agent as a cynical manipulator of their appearance. The true agent is that which selects appropriate personae. It is, in effect, still the abstract Meadian 'I'. On such an account, the avatar is, as Turkle suggests, merely an persona, and the 'real' person exists in flesh and blood, in the offline world.

Yet this interpretation can be challenged. The Meadian 'I' is, it has been argued above, in its very abstraction, impotent. At best it is the condition of possibility of action, but is not itself active. From Merleau-Ponty it may be argued that the substantial condition of agency lies in the concrete body. Taking this argument further, it may be suggested that the human agent only becomes capable of real choice and autonomy when both embodied and situated within a world. That is to say that agency is facilitated by the availability of the concrete cultural resources made available to it in the world.<sup>vii</sup> The world, experienced through the body, offers the resources necessary to make choices. The virtually embodied player is thus not merely confronted by a new set of possibilities from which she or he can choose. Rather, the very parameters and possibilities of choice are reconstituted by the experience of the virtual world. By returning to the discussion of Merleau-Ponty above. There it was argued that freedom is enabled by the concrete embedding of the agent in the world.

While Merleau-Ponty's agency focuses on the body, following Mead and Goffman a richer notion of embeddedness may be suggested. This is to argue that the agent is enabled constituted in its freedom by drawing on, not merely on embodied perception, but also upon a socially interpreted and negotiated world. The point is, then, that Goffman's agent does not make a decision about the presentation of self from a 'nowhere' outside society. Rather, the decision is made within the concrete social world. There is no agency, and thus no personhood, outside the concrete embeddedness in society. There is no abstract 'I' or Cartesian ego. Rather, the person, characterised in terms of a specific normative interpretation and thus constitution of its world, and thus as a being that has distinctively interpreted experiences, motivations and behavioural responses, is constituted through embodied social interaction within a particular world. Recalling the conventional and often alien nature of the rules that constitute the virtual world (and that it may be presumed, following Mead on play, are internalised into the roles that avatars play), it may be argued that the virtual body of the avatar and MMOW that it inhabits and within which it has its agency are constitutive of a world that is so radically different from any experienced by the flesh and blood player, that it becomes possible, and at times necessary, to understand the agency that is manifest in the avatar as a separate person (and as such as constituted in its own unique narrative).

This analysis remains vulnerable to Lockean accounts of memory. The flesh and blood player can, when they stop playing, still remember online experiences, and even while playing, however absorbing that play might be, still recall offline experiences. The radical break in memory required by the Lockean account of multiple persons seems not to be available. It may nonetheless be argued that as argued above, while shifting between worlds may not, as Locke would want, sever the thread of memory, it does serve radically to transform the quality of memory. Is transformed. On such an account, it is plausible to suggest that the radical strangeness of the virtual world does encourage an understanding of the avatar as a separate person. It is being suggested that, once embedded in the virtual world – and so becoming

rather than merely having an avatar – agency may change so fundamentally that choices that would have been incomprehensible offline become natural and desirable online. While online, the offline memory may then be recalled and perceived, but only through the lens of the current online embodiment. As such it is qualitatively changed. Thus, for example, after a rewarding experience questing in *WoW*, the remembered achievements of an offline life may seem boring and hollow, not something to which one would want to return readily. Equally, after experiencing the rich rewards of offline work and achievement, the online quest may appear shallow and a waste of time. Put otherwise, the narratives of offline and online life will diverge, potentially to the point of inconsistency. This begins to suggest that it is legitimate to assert that two persons, rather than merely two personalities, exist.

In summary, virtual worlds offer the possibility of the constitution of a parallel and separate person, if personhood is understood as substantial agency. Cartesian identity is abstract. It is a mere possibility of personhood until realised substantially through embodiment in a social world. This possibility is constructed as a concrete person, retrospectively and out of remembered details, in a broadly coherent narrative construct. The coherence and meaningfulness of this narrative will depend, in significant part, upon the rules that govern the social roles and worlds. Such rules give meaning to social actions. Personal identity begins to fragment as the rules that govern diverse roles and worlds diverge to the point of incommensurability. It is thus being suggested, not simply that the avatar is a separate person, and that Turkle's 'distributed self' is necessarily understood as a multiplicity of persons. Rather, it is being suggested that the virtual world poses a challenge. The challenge posed by the virtual world, thanks to the fluidity and alienation of the avatar is such that the player is confronted with anomalous experiences that require incorporation into a coherent narrative of personhood. Some experiences may be so anomalous that a plurality of narratives, and thus the experience of multiple selves, offers the most meaningful and coherent option., lies in constructing a coherent narrative of a person consistent with (and indeed meaningful to) any offline sense of self.

#### Interpretations of virtual experience.

Accounts of players' diverse understandings of their relationship to their avatars may be understood as responses to the challenge posed by virtual play. Geraci, with reference to the ludic *WoW*, proposes four different relationships: (1) character as extension of the self; (2) multiple characters reflecting different aspects of the self; (3) a combination of these first two; (4) the character as nothing but as toy or puppet for playing the game (2014, p. 67). Crucially, he notes that at least half of the players to whom he spoke adopted the fourth option. Perhaps more significantly, with reference to the paidiaic *SL*, Geraci highlights the difference between those players who treat their avatar as an augmentation of their offline selves (and thus, as Turkle privileges, expressing or exploring different 'aspects' of a complex offline personality), and those 'immersionists' who treat the avatar as a personality that is wholly distinct from the offline self of the player (2014, pp. 112-3). One immersionist notes how her avatar 'woke up, emerged as a personality, and kicked [her] creator out' (Geraci 2014, p. 113). It may still be noted that, in this quote, the avatar emerges, not as a person or self, but as a 'personality'. The shifts and ambiguities between key terms continue.

The complexity of players' relationships to their avatars may be clarified by considering an extreme example. Ethnographer Tom Boellstorff created a *SL* avatar, Tom Bukowski, that mimicked his offline self in order to study the virtual world (Boellstorff 2008). Confined by research ethics, if nothing else, in *SL* he occupies the social role of the ethnographer, and thus akin to the role that Boellstorff occupied in his earlier field work in Indonesia. Here the player is at pains to make the avatar as transparent as possible to his offline professional purposes and preoccupations, given the limits of the representational medium that is *SL*.

Against Boellstorff's 'mimetic-player' may be placed the 'role-player'. Rather than considering the avatar as a simple representation of oneself in the game medium, the avatar may be more or less radically separated from one's flesh and blood self. If an MMOG invites the player to adopt a role in order to play the game, then that role, manifest through the avatar, may be considered little more than a playing piece or puppet. One need have no emotional connection to the avatar. It need not facilitate even the exploration of the different 'aspects' of oneself to which Turkle refers. There may still be narrative challenges here, for the player may take an aesthetic pride in playing the character well, coherently and imaginatively (and as such construct a coherent narrative for that character). Such thoughtful and committed play may indeed enhance the experience the game, but the player would still not need, in any way, to understand the avatar as a real person, merely as a fictional character.

MMOWs, such as *SL*, confuse this relationship between mimesis and role-play, and as such place more complex narrative demands upon the player. This may be illustrated and more profoundly analysed by returning to augmentationists and immersionists. Both may be understood as role-players. Immersionists are simply more intense in their role-play. Very tellingly, Geraci suggests that the distinction lies in the 'metaphysical commitments' of the players. Augmentationists see *SL* as an extension of their offline selves, while immersionists recognise a radical ontological break between online and offline (2014, p. 111). As such, both are recognising and responding to virtual reality as an ontological challenge. Geraci then suggests that immersionists may be shallow or deep. The difference, he argues, is that shallow immersionists know that they are 'playing with identity in *SL*' (p. 111). Shallow immersion is self-conscious role-playing, while deep immersion is not. However, this distinction is not wholly satisfactory for it muddles the relationship between an augmentationist and a shallow immersionist. Further, it is not clear in what sense deep immersionists are not aware of role-playing.

If the earlier analyses of role-play and the constitute nature of rules in games are plausible, then the key distinction is between augmentationists, who are self-conscious role-players – albeit that they see their roles as being linked to and playing with aspects of their offline personality – and the more daring immersionists – who construct the *pretence* of total absorption in the avatar, not as a conventional construct, but as a discovered and natural being, that has its own coherence and integrity. Put otherwise, the deep immersionist asserts that any question as to the relationship between the avatar and the flesh and blood player is grounded in a category mistake. The very question misunderstands the nature of the avatar (which is ontologically something radically distinct from any flesh and blood operator).<sup>viii</sup> On such an interpretation deep immersion is not unconscious, but rather a conscious and imaginative engagement with the question of the nature of personhood. Augmentationists and immersionists are alike (valid) responses to the narrative challenge posed by virtual play.

## Concluding Remarks

In his commentary on Goffman, MacIntyre takes his account of the presentation of the self to be symptomatic of the fragmenting affect that modern society, with its requirement that agents disperse themselves between discrete social roles. For MacIntyre, the fragmentation of the self is a problem, and it is a problem that invites the solution of finding appropriate ways to reconstruct a unified narrative of the self (2007, p. 34). It has been claimed above that the experience of virtual reality poses an ontological challenge in so far as it invites reflection, in the form of the construction of coherent narratives of the self, on the nature of personhood. This challenge may be understood in MacIntyrean terms. In entering a virtual world, and becoming embodied as an avatar, one begins to play with social roles and the processes through which self-consciousness is constructed in contemporary society. The fluidity of the avatar and the strangeness of the virtual world offer a potentially radical experience of

fragmentation. Players, it has been suggested, respond to this experience in different ways, offering different narratives.

The mimetic player treats the virtual world as the possibility for the projection of an offline social role. The discontinuity between the virtual and non-virtual is discounted. In effect, the ontological challenge is ignored. There is no special difficulty in narrating virtual experiences, for they will be coherent with offline experience.

The role-player adopts something akin to the cynical interpretation of Goffman. The avatar is a mere, self-consciously adopted, persona. It is a tool for playing the game. Perhaps more subtly, the virtual world is itself experienced as an object within the offline world, and not as a world in its own right. The role-player never leaves the offline world, and thus ultimately it is their flesh and blood embodiment that determines the way in which they experience the game. Again, the narrative of virtual experience is easily accommodated within the narrative of the flesh and blood self, and at most requires the caveat that this is play, and as such a hiatus from the pressures of everyday life.

The augmentationist recognises the separateness of the virtual world, but in treating the avatar as an extension or exploration of the offline self, continues to oscillate between the two worlds. Here the ontological challenge is more acute. The avatar within the virtual world will have an autonomy of its own. Its behaviour, its attitudes and perceptions may significantly diverge from those of the flesh and blood player. Traditional narrative structures that assume a unified, if developing, character at their heart, may thus become strained and awkward. Augmentationists typically struggle to find a grammar that can articulate this complex, uneasy experience.

The immersionist offers the most radical solution. The virtual world is sundered from the flesh and blood world, and the narrative of online experience need have nothing to do with flesh and blood experience. Cartesian identity is abandoned. Yet, unlike the augmentationist, this solution may be too radical. It too readily assumes that the online person can forget the offline, or that online experiences might affect the offline (and vice versa). In effect, it ignores its own consciousness of the division between online and offline, and pretends that, in the virtual world, it is not playing.

Virtual worlds allow play with personal identity. But the presentation of self in virtual media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter, are increasingly important in contemporary society. The virtual world is thus also a play with the more serious work done in other social media. As such, the four approaches towards the challenge of the self, just rehearsed from the first person perspective, also have important moral implications for how one perceives others within virtual reality.

One may perceive the avatar of the other, their presentation of self within virtual reality, as mimetic. That is to say, one could naively assume that the person encountered online is continuous with the person offline. The dangers of such naivety, especially when they lead to unguarded encounters with the flesh and blood player, are evident. To treat others as mere role-players (and thus potentially con-artists) is more cautious, but risks surrendering the emotional intensity that encounters within virtual worlds can yield. To treat others as augmentationists is perhaps the obvious approach towards most social media sites. On such sites, the flesh and blood self is presented to its best advantages, as photographs are Photoshopped, Cvs tweaked and one's achievements flagged and failures glossed over. Yet, the complexity of augmentation reasserts itself. Without contact with the flesh and blood player, exactly what has been augmented, and what that augmentation might mean, cannot be known. The flesh and blood player remains an enigma. In any intense, emotionally involving encounter within virtual reality, the person encountered is thus, by default, an immersionist. The person encountered exists only within the virtual world. Assumptions about the flesh and blood player are mere speculation. An ethics that at once safeguards the players, and yet allows

intense involvement, presupposes that everyone is an immersionist. It is thus here, in one's online relationships to others, that the separateness of the personhood of the avatar has its ultimate purchase. The avatar, morally and prudentially, should be treated as a person that is radically distinct to any flesh and blood player. It is a person that only exists inworld, and attempts to link it back to a flesh and blood human being will at best be disappointing, and at worst dangerous

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i

*World of Warcraft* is a registered trademark of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. *Second Life* is a registered trade mark of Linden Research, Inc.

ii

It may be noted that the concept of the 'avatar' may embrace any online representation, so will include the visual and textual presentations of self found on social web sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and ResearchGate.

iii

Suits does not fully recognise the significance of the need for players to be conscious of the conventionality of play. See Edgar's criticism of Suits' interpretation of the thought experiment of the 'dedicated driver' as an articulation of this point (Edgar 2014 pp. 34-8).

iv

Hume's bundle theory the self takes this argument to its logical conclusion. The self, at least as soul substance, does not exist, for it is not experienced. All that one experiences of one's self is a continually changing flux of mental events (1985, pp. 299-310).

v

The implications of Locke's arguments are developed most radically, in the analytic tradition, by Parfit (1986).

vi

Blascovich and Bailenson (2011) explore in depth the way in which the experience of online bodies, both superior and inferior to one's flesh and blood body, may change at least the personality of the player.

vii

Sandel (1982) makes a similar criticism of Rawls' (broadly Lockean) conception of the liberal self.

f Rawls (broadly Lockean) conception of the liberal self.

viii

<http://sophrosyne-sl.livejournal.com/50673.html>The deeply immersed avatar Sophrosyne Stenvaag also has Flickr and Twitter accounts, and thus an extensive online presence. See <https://www.flickr.com/photos/8325800@N07/> [all accessed 11<sup>th</sup> November 2015]