

Chapter 17

Creating a Framework to Analyze the Perception of Selfhood in Artistic Practice within Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws upon existing identity theories to create a framework with which to examine the expression of self via avatars within Second Life. The framework is then applied to the practice of a number of artists working with themes relating to identity using avatars within Second Life, by drawing upon the author's own experience of these works and the artists comments taken from their writings and from discussions and correspondence with them, to examine the role their work plays in changing our understanding of the way that identity is expressed and perceived within virtual worlds.

INTRODUCTION

The use of avatars to represent the participant within computer games and social virtual worlds is a long standing convention dating back to the earliest text based chat rooms and first person shooter games. A wealth of writing exists cataloguing research within virtual worlds in general, and Second Life in particular, much of which addresses topics relating to the expression of self by means of avatar construction and appearance and to their operators' behavior and interaction with others via their avatars. Much of this research serves to highlight the significant variation in the ways in which operators relate to their avatars. Nick Yee (2008) writes that "For some players the avatar becomes a purposeful projection or idealization of their own identity, while for others, the avatar is an experiment with new identities." In some instances avatars are viewed as little more than 'game pieces' which the operator controls which Domenico Quaranta (2007) refers to as "a kind of puppet that does everything I tell it to by means of a series of input tools" (p.6); in other cases they are digital placeholders or 'proxies' for the operator

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within the virtual environment (Apter, 2008; Lastowka & Hunter, 2006, p.15; Little, 1999), while for some individuals their avatars are a means of creative expression or even for the transference of self into virtual worlds.

David J. Gunkel (2010) writes of the need to “engage in philosophical speculation about the nature of (virtual) reality... to get real about computer-generated experience and social interaction, providing this relatively new area of study with a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of some of its own key terms and fundamental concepts” (p.3). Building on Gunkel’s discussions it is proposed that there is a need to establish a common critical language to allow structured discussion, comparison and analysis of the perceptions of selfhood via the medium of avatars within virtual worlds. It is therefore the intention of this chapter to define a framework categorizing different typologies of avatars, their purposes and the relationships that their operators develop with them.

Such a framework might then be applied to all areas of avatar use within virtual worlds. However the application of the framework to a particular exploration of how the use of avatars for creative expression has, directly or indirectly, addressed themes of identity within the virtual realm of Second Life, is an area where it may provide insight into how artistic practitioners have challenged the notions of the roles and purposes of avatars, and the nature of the relationships that their operators develop with them.

The categorization of the typologies used within the framework will be achieved by reference to existing paradigms relating to our understanding of identity within the actualized world of our corporeal existence. It is therefore necessary to first consider the progression of theories which have shaped our concepts of identity and selfhood from the pre-modern understanding, through modern and post-modern theories, taking into account also the writings of contemporary authors and researchers whose studies relate directly to Second Life.

BACKGROUND: AN OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY THEORIES

The presentation of identity theories herein will not be exhaustive but will focus instead on the main concepts which will be used to develop the framework of avatar typologies. While these concepts will be presented in an order which generally reflects the chronology in which the theories were developed, or were the commonly accepted paradigm, an attempt has been made to group them into underlying themes rather than to stick rigidly to the schools of thought from which they were generated.

Role Identity

Stuart Hall (1995), writing on cultural identity, discussed the view of identity prevalent in the ‘pre-modern’ era that “One’s status, rank and position in the ‘great chain of being’--the secular and divine order of things- overshadowed any sense that one was a sovereign individual” (p.602). Described by Charles Taylor (1989) this concept of one’s own identity involved “connecting one’s life up to some greater reality or story” (p.42), i.e. identifying oneself as synonymous with one’s role in life be it warrior, citizen or monk.

This pre-modern notion of role identity is an enduring one; Eva G. Clarke and Elaine M. Justice note that, even in contemporary society, when adults are asked to introduce themselves they will often do so

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