

Intertwining Identities:
Why There is No Escaping Physical Identity in the Virtual World
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A. Introduction

Traditionally, many philosophical views of personality have considered the individual removed from social context. The paradigm of this approach is John Locke (1979), who opened the gates for a flood of cases involving amnesia and body-swapping. These examples focus on the individual and the specific parameters of the thought-experiment; they do not look at how one's identity is shaped by other people or by social forces.

Other approaches to personal identity have placed a much greater emphasis on the relationship between one's self and other factors. G. W. F. Hegel (1931), for instance, emphasized that our identities do not form in a vacuum. Rather, our identity is created in relation to another – it is only when we face and are challenged by another self-consciousness that our identity truly emerges. As such, we cannot consider a person's identity without considering her relation to others, since those others are instrumental in forming her identity..

George Herbert Mead (1967) perhaps stated it most strongly in claiming that “Selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves...The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group.” (p. 164) Yet, of course, it is not simply that we must consider individuals in relation to other individuals. As Mead notes, we belong to social groups, and frequently we are seen not as a single individual but as a member of a group; I am not seen only as myself, but as an American, say.

If our selves are shaped by the relationships we have to others in our social group, then a full understanding of our identities must include discussion of these social factors. Our understanding of race, nationality, and so forth is germane to our understanding of identity – we are shaped by the communities we belong to.¹ With the rise of online social interactions, we must consider how our identity is affected by the virtual world.²

Online interactions are fascinating philosophically for a number of reasons. The prospect of anonymity online, for instance, seems to suggest that our actions in the virtual world can be divorced from our offline selves; this raises questions about the effect of anonymity on our online actions and representations. Furthermore, virtual communities are thought to differ from many traditional kinds of communities; it is worth asking whether and how these differences affect our identities.

Before delving more deeply into how identity works in the online world, an important caveat is required: virtual communities are not all the same. We can interact online in a plethora of

¹ I have argued elsewhere (Neely 2012) that true communities are defined by the relations among community members; in this case there is a symbiotic relationship between individuals and communities – we define communities and are defined by them in return.

² Note that in this paper I will be concentrating on identity for individuals; I will be setting aside questions of group identity and cases where multiple users share a single avatar.

ways, ranging from online discussion forums and blogs to creating avatars in social virtual worlds such as *Second Life*³ or games such as *World of Warcraft*. Johnny Søraker (2011) devised a useful categorization of what he calls virtual worlds, virtual environments, and virtual communities that helps clarify the differences he sees in each type of space. While all three of them are computer-based and interactive, they share only a partial overlap of features. A *virtual environment*, such as a single-player video game, has a feature he calls indexicality, meaning that “one is an *agent* at a specific place and, as such, *is present* at that place in one form or another – typically as an avatar.” (Søraker 2011, p. 60) A *virtual world* is an environment which is also multi-user, such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*. A *virtual community* shares some features with virtual worlds and some with virtual environments, because it is an interactive computer simulation which is multi-user but not necessarily indexical; one does not need to have a location, per se, in a virtual community, despite the fact that one can interact with other users.

While I think that Søraker has highlighted important distinctions among different sorts of online spaces, the terminology is complicated by the fact that it seems clear we could also have a community within a virtual world. For instance, people form guilds in *World of Warcraft* and various kinds of organizations within *Second Life*; it seems likely that these smaller units have influence on identity, not simply the virtual world as a whole.⁴ While it is not entirely clear from the article, I believe Søraker would allow a virtual community to be indexical – he simply does not require it. As such, the term “virtual community” has a sort of vagueness, since a community can have indexicality or lack it, and we can view an entire virtual world as a kind of virtual community or look for subcommunities within that world.

From an identity perspective, I find it more useful to view virtual communities fairly broadly and distinguish between virtual interactions that involve an avatar and those that do not. To illustrate why, let us consider the issue of how identity and deception are treated within online communities. Richard C. MacKinnon introduces a system of understanding the relationship between a user and their personae (or avatars) online:

A representation is transparent when the user attempts to represent him or herself as he or she is; a representation is translucent when the Usenet persona is only a shadow of the user; and accordingly, a representation is opaque when the persona does not resemble the user at all. (MacKinnon 1995, p. 118)

For example, if I were to maintain a personal blog in which I clearly chronicled my life with little distortion or embellishment, that representation would be transparent. If I created an avatar in *Second Life* with many of my characteristics, but perhaps concealed some of my insecurities or physical disabilities, then that representation would be translucent; it retains some of my characteristics, but it changes or omits some of them as well. Lastly, if I represent myself as

³ *Second Life* is a setting in which you can create an avatar, objects in the world, and interact with other users/objects in that world fairly freely. While there are many similarities between this and older text-only Multi-User Object-Oriented Dungeons (MOOs/MUDs), Mia Consalvo (2013) notes that there is an interesting distinction between social virtual worlds and games or objective-based virtual worlds. Since social worlds are more freeform they may well attract a different group of people and have different group norms than game-based worlds.

⁴ Indeed, as Martey and Consalvo (2011) discovered, users in *Second Life* were worried about conforming to group norms such as appropriate dress for their avatars even in situations involving groups of only three to five players.

wholly different – perhaps impersonating someone of another race and gender – then my representation is opaque.⁵

While I believe that MacKinnon has identified an important basis for understanding the relationship between our online representations and our offline identities, there is an aspect he omits. One of the key elements to note about virtual communities is the presumption of identity within different communities. Non-avatar-based communities generally assume a sameness of identity between your representation online and your self: you are being transparent, or perhaps translucent.⁶ If you portray yourself as quite differently than you truly are, you may well be viewed as unethical for doing so.⁷

In avatar-based communities, there is sometimes a presumption of difference of identity and sometimes no presumption either way. For instance, suppose you participate in a particular kind of online role-playing game. In this game people adopt the personae of various fantastic characters and try to interact strictly in the manner of those characters; in this situation, others are almost certainly going to assume that you are not who you are portraying – there is no reason to assume that you truly are a magic wand wielding mage, and quite a few reasons to assume that you are not. This kind of portrayal, however, is tacitly consented to by all who participate in the game; there is no deception involved because no one truly expects a transparent representation in this context.⁸ If you are playing a game or writing a blog in a community where some people create personae that are largely themselves and some do not, then there may not be a presumption either way; some representations are likely closer to transparent and some are closer to opaque.

I will argue that our online representations are not completely opaque. There are certainly differences in how our identities are presented in virtual and physical communities. There are even differences in how identity works in different kinds of virtual communities, some of which may prove important for our understanding of identity.⁹ However, there is less separation between online and offline identities than people often think: our online identities always stem from our offline identities and, as such, are never truly independent of them. Furthermore, we may revise our offline identities in the light of how our online identities are received by others in our community. Our identities are thus not separable – they are inextricably intertwined.

B. The Relationship between Online and Offline Selves

⁵ Note that I will argue later that a truly opaque representation is very difficult to attain.

⁶ It is not clear that being translucent is necessarily deceptive rather than, say, showing a certain prudence. Revealing all of your personal characteristics online is, sadly, risky; you might well not wish to post that you are a single female living alone at a particular address, since it may invite predators of various kinds.

⁷ We will discuss the ethical ramifications attendant on the presumption of identity further in section C.

⁸ In fact, in many of these situations it will be very difficult to have a completely transparent representation. For instance, in the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*, each person must choose a race and class for their characters. While it is possible to choose to be a human, and thus correctly represent one's race, it is unlikely that a typical player is a hunter, druid, mage, warrior, etc. in real life. Hence even if their character has a very similar personality as the player, the representation cannot possibly be truly transparent.

⁹ Lucas D. Introna (1997), for instance, holds that only some online communities have enough shared history and context to allow us to form true identities.

A key question concerning online identity is how separable it is from our offline identity – could we have two quite different identities?¹⁰ There seem to be two main reasons that people are tempted to give an affirmative answer to this question. First, people are thought to act very differently online than offline. Second, people sometimes present or represent themselves differently online than offline. I will consider each of these in turn, arguing that in fact our identities are entwined.

First, how are we to handle the notion that people act differently online than they do offline? There has been a great deal of discussion, notably by John Suler (Suler 2004; Suler and Phillips 1998), of the fact that people are generally more willing to harm others online than offline. For instance, people engage in behavior such as "trolling," wherein they deliberately try to upset or anger people online for their own entertainment. Likewise, people will use offensive language or slurs online fairly casually, even if they might not be willing to use those words in person. On a more benign note, he also notes that people are often willing to reveal information online which they might not share as easily in person; there is a level of trust that seems to build more freely in virtual interactions.

In each of these cases, the user has a sense of separation between herself and the behavior. In the antisocial case, the user either does not see the harm she has caused or does not pay a price for causing it. Similarly, the direct risk a user runs by revealing personal information online is less than doing so in person; if you disclose your race or sexual orientation and others react badly, you are at least safe from direct physical repercussions.¹¹ While I acknowledge these points, I am not convinced that this represents a change from offline interactions; humans are quite capable of failing to pay attention to suffering which is far away, for instance. Our ability to ignore the harm caused by our actions online is akin to our ability to ignore the harm caused by sweatshops in third world countries. The lack of empathy for people online mirrors that displayed for people we view as lesser in the physical world.¹²

The question of responsibility for harm caused online is interesting. One important factor to note is that we tend to attribute more anonymity to our online activities than they actually have. As Hua Qian and Craig Scott (2007) discuss, while many relatively savvy individuals know not to post their names and addresses online, they are less careful with photos and other visual indicators of their identities and locations. Moreover, as we see in work by Rong Zheng et al. (2006), we are increasingly able to identify people across virtual communities from relatively short samples of their writings; we are also able to attribute anonymous comments to specific individuals given known samples of their writings (Iqbal, Binsalleh, Fung, & Debbabi 2013). Hence our ability to elude identification is unclear – it is not as easy to avoid responsibility for our online actions as we might think.

¹⁰ There is also an interesting question about whether we have a single online identity; I believe we do, but space does not permit a full elaboration of the point here.

¹¹ While other users certainly could track you down to assault you, it takes more effort than if you are in the same room.

¹² Even the combination of anonymity and online interaction is not sufficient to guarantee bad behavior, as Chui (2014) points out; not every person engages in antisocial behavior under these conditions, so they form only a part of the explanation.

In addition, responsibility and punishment are not notions which must be tied to the physical world. There has been increasing interest in justice with respect to online interactions, and both Farnaz Alemi (2008) and Marcus Johansson (2009) note that people need not be punished in the physical world in order to face consequences. Indeed, it may be more effective to punish some virtual crimes in the virtual world; being publically shamed in an online community one has wronged may be more appropriate than being forced to pay a fine, for instance. Of course, determining what the appropriate punishment for a virtual crime is can be difficult. De Paoli and Kerr (2012) have an interesting discussion of an attempt by an MMO to punish players who cheat. One of the most interesting facets of the situation was the reaction of the player community to those punishments; the players engaged in a great deal of debate over what an appropriate punishment should be, which is the same kind of normative deliberation that physical communities engage in when faced with wrongdoing.

While virtual punishments can be quite effective, they will not deter all instances of online bad behavior; if one has no attachment to the community, one is unlikely to feel shamed by any public discipline nor care if one is excluded from the community. What this focus on virtual punishment underscores are two key facts. One, I need not be able to link your virtual actions to a physical person in order for you to face consequences; anonymity is not an escape from all punishment. Two, the online forums in which people act badly towards each other are likely to be those to which they have little attachment, not those where they intend to stay. In physical communities, you do not litter in your neighbors' yards if you are trying to have good relations with them. Similarly, you will not violate the standards of a virtual community you wish to become a valued member of.¹³

One could argue that the ease of leaving and joining online groups causes this issue to be more pressing for virtual communities. After all, the stakes are much lower if you alienate members of your virtual community since it is far less traumatic to find a new home online than it is to move to another town and find a new geographical community. Furthermore, the average person is unlikely to change their name and appearance in order to start over within a physical community they have wronged. Yet it is not uncommon for people to enter online communities under a new username if they wish a fresh start. It is worth noting, however, that even in the virtual world we leave trails. For instance, many already use IP addresses to track people online; this is in part to make it more difficult to sneak back into a virtual community that has ostracized you, since a simple change of name will no longer disguise you. As this kind of tracking becomes more prevalent, and as techniques such as Zheng et al. (2006) discuss become more wide-spread, it will become harder simply to abandon a wronged online community without any repercussions; this ability will no longer serve as a way of sharply distinguishing online and offline communities.

In sum, I do not find a great discrepancy in behavior between online and offline communities. While there are certainly cases of bad behavior online, they mimic the callous treatment of people perceived as lesser in the physical world; the online world may exacerbate

¹³ I suspect the issue of attachment and membership in a group over time is also part of what enables people to act abhorrently when they are part of a mob. Not only do people feel a lack of individual responsibility, but their membership in the group is transient – as such, they are unlikely to worry about their reputation within that group or as a member of that group.

our ability to dehumanize others, but it does not create that ability. Similarly, our willingness to engage in antisocial behaviors online is simply an expression of a trait that is already present in us, namely, a belief that certain behaviors are acceptable when the stakes are low or when we do not believe we will be punished. The lack of responsibility many feel for their actions online will likely dwindle as we devise appropriate responses to antisocial behavior online; as such, I expect that the gap between permissible online and offline behaviors will shrink over time.

The second basis for arguing that online and offline identities are separable was that people present themselves differently online. Indeed, the literature contains a plethora of examples of people either lamenting or celebrating our ability to present ourselves in different ways in the virtual world.¹⁴ Two of the most interesting examples are our ability to gender-switch, i.e., portray ourselves as being of a different gender than we actually are, and our ability to hide disabilities and thus not have our identities reduced to them. While the former has undoubtedly had more coverage in the popular press, the latter seems to be one of great hope to many.

A major obstacle to seeing a kinship between online and offline identity is the belief that you can change who you are online in a way you cannot offline. While we rarely claim to know everything about other members of offline communities,¹⁵ there still seems to be a fear that we are more easily deceived about major identity categories online; thus a person could pretend to be a woman from London when he is actually a man from Boise. A common refrain in discussions of trusting people online is the worry that the person you are interacting with is not as they appear. This is perhaps most prevalent in concerns about who children are interacting with online; we want to know whether they are chatting with another teen or a child predator. However, the unease flavors all of our online relationships in diverse ways. We wonder whether someone on a dating site is giving an accurate portrayal of themselves, whether the person editing a Wikipedia page actually knows anything about the topic, and whether the restaurant reviews on Yelp were written by impartial customers or by the owners of the establishment.

There are two things worth noting in response to this concern. First, we play with our identity offline as well. We frequently try out different ways of dressing, speaking, and interacting with people. Indeed, many have noted (Turkle 2004; Simpson 2005; Crowe and Bradford 2006; Foley, Jones, Aschbacher, and McPhee 2012) that this is a natural part of child development and one which carries over into the virtual world; however, this does not end with childhood. The prevalence of New Year's Resolutions and self-help books indicates that we often yearn to change ourselves in various ways. Our desired alterations may be less drastic than changing our gender, but they indicate that neither our identity nor how we portray it in the physical world is static.

Second, while it might be easy to deceive someone about small matters, such as making minor adjustments to your age, large deceptions are difficult to sustain. Anyone can claim to be of a different race or gender online, but maintaining the illusion takes hard work. A convincing

¹⁴ We will discuss the literature in more detail below, but Reingold (1993), Reid (1995), Roberts and Parks (2001), Simpson (2005), and Geraci & Geraci (2013) all discuss gender-swapping; Carr (2010), Stendal et al. (2011), and Best & Butler (2013) discuss disability.

¹⁵ As evidenced by the stereotypical response "Oh, but he seemed like such a nice young man!" to discovering your neighbor is a serial killer.

portrayal of another's experience goes beyond simply stating that they have a set of characteristics. An author who seeks to write a character with a different background than his own must work hard to sound authentic. Similarly, maintaining the deception of being a woman from London will also require work to be convincing.¹⁶

The issue of sustaining identity in the virtual world raises the point that personal identity online is always based in the physical world. Simpson (2005) and Crowe and Bradford (2006) note that, no matter how you are portraying yourself, that portrayal has a genesis. If you are representing yourself as a different gender, you must obtain your image of that gender from somewhere. Men and women are socialized differently in our society, resulting in different speech patterns, socially acceptable conversational topics, etc.¹⁷ No one possesses innate knowledge of how the other gender acts; hence that knowledge must come from one's observations, stereotypes, past interactions, and so forth.

More generally, it is worth noting that people tend to use similar identity categories, such as gender, to represent themselves online as they do offline. In avatar-based encounters, the avatar is generally humanoid, with physical features not unlike our own. While we may not specify all of the categories that impact our identity in the physical world – social class, for instance, is rarely explicitly represented – our online personae still reflect many of the aspects of our physical identities.¹⁸

The virtual world is also not free of the social biases and beliefs from the physical world. Even if you specify yourself as having a particular gender or race, you may well not be believed. We commonly see denials of others' gender in video games, but disbelief is encountered in other contexts as well. Diane Carr (2010) discusses that even if you choose to disclose your disability status, you may well not be believed; women also are asked to “prove” that they are female online (Reingold 1993), although it is not clear how that is possible. Similarly, in settings such as *Second Life*, non-white users who encounter mainly white avatars tend to assume that most users are white and/or adopt a white avatar in order to pass.¹⁹ (Lee & Park 2011; Lee 2014) The social expectations and stereotypes of the physical world impact both what people choose to portray and how that portrayal is received.

¹⁶ Granted, in short interactions we may be unable to uncover your deceit because there is insufficient information with which to judge your veracity; however, this is also true of conversations struck up with strangers at bus stops.

¹⁷ Richardson (2011) notes this as well when she discusses how the phrases we use can indicate information about gender even when we theoretically do not know anything about the identity of the author online.

¹⁸ Having said that, the choices that a game or community designers can be very important in this context. In a text-based game if a user is required to specify a gender but not a race, for instance, then users may simply assume that all characters are white; those who choose to specify another race may be seen as giving race greater prominence than those who do not, even though such users may simply be trying to represent themselves accurately as a person of color. Similarly, by requiring all characters to fall into one of two gender categories, a designer erases possibilities for people whose gender identities are outside that range. See Kolko (1999) and White (2001) for further discussions of race and gender respectively.

¹⁹ Of course, frequently it is not truly possible to create a non-white avatar in any case; as Dietrich (2013) noted, many “non-white” avatars offered as options in games are simply white-featured avatars with darker skin colors.

Physical identities thus directly affect online identities in two ways. First, people's portrayals of identities are based on real life experiences of identity.²⁰ While you may imagine yourself to be a robot in a game, you can only approach it from the perspective of a human in a particular social situation. Second, others' evaluations of your identity claims are based on their understandings of physical identities and on their pre-existing social biases. Thus a mere claim of being a woman living in London will not necessarily suffice to pass as one. People will evaluate that claim based on how you match up to their perception of what such a woman would be like and how probable they believe it is to encounter such a person in this particular online context. Your success depends on understanding that identity in the physical world and translating it into the virtual world, as well as on being sufficiently convincing to overcome any presumptions of identity.²¹

C. On Avatars and Ethics

I have touched upon the use of avatars briefly, but they are worth further consideration because they illustrate well the interaction between offline and online identities. Earlier I divided online interactions roughly into those in which we used an avatar and those in which we did not. In a general sense, an avatar is simply a representation we use to represent ourselves within a virtual setting for the purpose of interacting with that setting and/or the other users. The paradigm case at present would be a 3D graphical representation within a virtual world such as *Second Life*, although the use of avatars in text-based settings such as MUDs or MOOs predate graphical virtual worlds. Melissa de Zwart and David Lindsay (2012) highlight the dual nature of avatars as both tools we use and presentations of ourselves that people often identify with. From an identity perspective, avatars would not be interesting if they were simply tools use to manipulate a virtual object – in such a situation, they would be akin to computer mice or keyboards, being simply another tool to accomplish a task online. However, avatars go beyond that, since many people identify with their avatars in some sense. Thus while there is no guarantee that people are representing themselves transparently or even translucently without an avatar, the use of avatars thrust identity questions into greater prominence.

The tendency of people to identify with their avatars does not imply that our avatars are somehow literally ourselves – as Denise Doyle (2009) notes, moving an avatar's body through a virtual world differs from moving your own body through space, not least because we rarely have a third-person perspective on our own physical body. Furthermore, while some physical constraints are lifted for avatars – you are more likely to find an avatar that can fly than a physical person with that ability – other limitations arise specifically for avatars. For instance, Dreyfus (2009) notes that avatars do not currently express emotions as well as people do; we cannot use them to convey some of the subtle shades of emotion we express in the physical world.²²

²⁰ While I mainly discussed deceptive identity online, it should be clear that if you are seeking to portray yourself accurately, that is also based on your physical identity – since your representation is transparent, that representation is even more directly based on your physical identity.

²¹ This is fairly akin to what actors or undercover agents do in the physical world – they also seek to embody another identity well enough to be convincing.

²² Interestingly, though, this is not always a bad thing. The simplistic nature of avatar-conveyed emotion allows people with autism, for instance, to train at recognizing emotions; the ability to standardize and simplify the

However, despite these differences, we still often seem to regard avatars as constituting our bodies in some sense. In virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, people spend a lot of time and money customizing their avatars to make them either accurate representations of themselves or representations of their ideal or fantasy selves. Similarly, they worry about whether their avatar is conforming to appropriate community norms of appearance and dress when interacting with others. (Martey & Consalvo 2011) The underlying reason for this seems to rest on the fact that, in virtual worlds, we mainly interact with other users via avatars; they are how we represent ourselves and are thus part of how we judge and are judged by others in the community. Hence in understanding identity in avatar-based virtual communities, we must consider the avatar, not only the user.²³ (Heinrich 2010)

Clearly we do not typically expect avatar-based representations to be wholly transparent. *Second Life* allows for more realistic portrayals of ourselves than many virtual worlds do, yet even there avatars are able to fly. In a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) such as *World of Warcraft*, the disconnect between the avatar's identity and the player's identity is still greater: a user is highly unlikely to be a fire bolt-flinging mage in real life. Even in these settings, however, the player's identity is part of the equation. As Alex Golub (2010) discusses, frequently in MMORPGs there are cooperative endeavors such as banding together to defeat a particularly difficult monster (or boss.) In these situations, known as raids, real-life traits such as patience and working well in a team will show through. As such, the player's identity is not totally irrelevant. Despite being masked by the avatar and the constraints of the game, some aspects of his identity will be revealed; his representation is thus translucent, not opaque.

There are two main places where the links between physical and online identity are best illustrated with respect to avatars. First, they emerge in the subject of avatar creation: what sorts of constraints should you follow in portraying yourself online? Second, they appear when considering avatar actions: what are you willing to do with your avatar? Are there actions which you simply will not take with your avatar because you would not take them in real life? Let us consider these two points in more depth.

Consider avatar creation. As mentioned in the previous section, there is much discussion about race and gender-switching online. One aspect of the debate which is often overlooked is that users themselves are often cognizant of context-sensitive ethical considerations pertaining to switching. For instance, in a role-playing game or other scenario where the player is expected to be rather different than the avatar, representing a different identity category is generally taken to

emotions conveyed is actually a plus for this usage. See Moore et al. (2005) and Hopkins et al. (2011) for further details; I discuss this kind of use of avatars below.

²³ Carruth and Hill (2015) have recently argued that, in fact, we do not encounter other users when we interact with their avatars; we only encounter the avatar. I find this unpersuasive. Generally we encounter avatars in situations where we are aware they were created by other users for the purposes of interaction – we thus are not faced with an “other minds” sort of situation where we wonder whether the avatar has a person behind it at all. Furthermore, in many such settings we are interacting directly with other users via voice or text chat, thus reinforcing the fact that there is a user behind the avatar. As such, while I believe we must consider the avatar, not just the user, I do not think we should exclude the user either.

be ethically unproblematic; people do not expect your avatar to reflect you accurately, hence there is no deception involved.²⁴

Other situations raise more debate. Both Reid (1995) and Roberts and Parks (2001) discuss gender-switching within a MOO.²⁵ Some people try different gender identities because they like the role-playing challenge, particularly attempting to convince other people that they are, in fact, the gender they claim to be; such users are seeking an accurate and convincing portrayal of the gender. Others see it as a chance to experience life from the perspective of the other gender, at least in that particular social context; they wish to see how women and men are treated differently, for instance. On the other hand, there are also users who see gender-switching as dishonest – it is violating a kind of implicit assumption that you are representing yourself accurately.²⁶

An interesting study by Segovia and Bailenson (2012) examined the reactions of people to virtual “imposters,” i.e., people whose avatars did not accurately represent themselves. What they found is that people reacted negatively to users who chose to disguise themselves in this fashion; they reacted less negatively if told that the user had no choice about the matter (i.e., they were not deliberately representing themselves inaccurately.) In the former case, people seemed to see the users as violating the implicit norms of the interaction – they willingly chose to be deceptive. Whether one sees gender-switching as wrong seems, in part, to come down to what a user sees as the norms of the community: is this a place where one needs to accurately represent oneself or is the identity portrayal more flexible?

There is clearly a strong connection for these users between avatar-creation and physical identity. If there were no connection – if the avatar were seen as completely divorced from offline identity concerns – then neither side of the debate would have traction. You cannot expect to learn something about another gender by portraying it online unless you believe that those portrayals give insight into that gender.²⁷ Similarly, one would not worry about being dishonest unless one thought that the virtual identity somehow linked back to physical identity; it is because they take avatars to represent themselves accurately that they see gender-switching as dishonest. Hence while the two sides of the gender-switching debate differ in their understanding of the nature of the connection between physical and virtual identity, they both see a strong connection between the two.

²⁴ Admittedly, you may not be taken seriously if you role-play a particular character badly, but that is less a question of ethics than of art.

²⁵ Note that these discussions frequently assume binary gender categories; the situation becomes more complex if we consider intersex people, for instance, but the same sorts of ethical considerations apply. See White (2001) for further discussion of this issue.

²⁶ This assumption doubtless varies among online communities – as mentioned before, no one will believe you are truly a wizard, hence that is not viewed as a deception. There is also a kind of reverse assumption applied in some scenarios where all instances of playing a female character are viewed as gender-switching; such users flatly refuse to believe that any players they encounter are female, hence all female characters must be being played by male users. This has more to do with stereotypes about gamers and the gaming community, however, than anything else.

²⁷ You could, perhaps, do a kind of meta-study of what it is like to portray a female avatar without connecting that to the real world. However, from the discussions in Roberts and Parks (2001), it seems clear that such users seek and expect a deeper understanding of gender or of their own gender expressions from this experience.

Questions concerning deception and community expectations are not unique to avatar-based communities, of course. As Jennifer Yurchisin et al. (2005) note, people frequently represent themselves on online dating sites not exactly as they are, but rather as they would like to be. Depending on the feedback they receive, they may then work to actualize that possible self. This sort of idealization can carry over into avatar-based communities. For instance, a study by Sung, Moon, Kang and Lin (2011) showed that people tended to make avatars with similar personalities as themselves, but slightly idealized along several axes. The question, therefore, is how far you can stray from your current self without being deceptive – you are, in a sense, creating an avatar that is very much like you and trying to determine which parameters you can vary ethically and by how much. The avatar at times can be seen as a kind of precursor to possible future physical selves – it is a way of trying out who you might become or working out issues you see yourself as having with your identity. (Martin 2004; Savin-Baden 2010; Turkle 2004)

The creation of avatars, then, is linked strongly to physical identity. The avatars may represent who we are or who we wish to be; they may even simply represent a kind of person we are interested in learning more about.²⁸ Thus while our avatars are not necessarily transparent representations of ourselves, they are bound up with our physical identities, and are subject to the same sorts of questions about community norms that influence expressions of identity offline.²⁹ Avatar creation, however, is not the only place we see a connection between online and offline identities; it is also apparent in the ways in which avatars are used and the potential for harm or benefit that stems from the avatar's actions.

One positive use of avatars is to mirror situations in the real world for the purposes of training. David Moore et al. (2005) and Hopkins et al. (2011), for instance, discuss using avatars to help autistic people learn to recognize emotions. The practice on avatars can aid their understanding of physical interactions; it also may provide them a way of interacting with others online, thus expanding their social possibilities. In a study by Allen D. Andrade et al. (2010) we see a slightly different kind of modeling in which doctors practice giving patients bad news; this allows them to simulate various difficult scenarios which they will experience as practitioners and learn the best ways to handle those situations. While these studies recognize the limitations of avatars, clearly there are enough parallels between the online and offline scenarios for the simulations to work; we can translate the experiences online into the physical world and obtain real goods.

There is a much more intense debate over the potential for harm. Earl Spurgin (2009) considers the case of two people who have a virtual affair in *Second Life*, unbeknownst to their partners. Assuming this does not cause the destruction of the real world relationships, he does not see these people as having committed any moral wrong; in essence he sees the virtual world as akin to a fantasy and thus a virtual affair as no different than a daydream. This strikes me as overly dismissive, since it ignores that monogamous relationships have certain binding promises

²⁸ Again, note that our portrayal of that alternate category must come from somewhere – the amount we learn about being another gender, say, will vary greatly depending on how accurate our portrayal is.

²⁹ For instance, we worry about correct clothing for various events, just as the people in *Second Life* wished to dress their avatars appropriately (Martey & Consalvo 2011); in both situations there are implicit or explicit community norms that we have to decide whether to conform to or violate.

about intimacy; by involving another person, one could argue that this is quite different than a fantasy – the fantasy breaks no promise, whereas the virtual affair does.

Many other authors have broader views than Spurgin about the potential for harm. Thomas M. Powers (2003) believes that real moral harm can occur in virtual communities that share enough features of our every day communities. Hence the fact that a community is online does not preclude moral harm from occurring in it. Similarly, Jeff Dunn (2012) argues against what he calls the Asymmetry thesis, namely, the idea that no action can be wrong within a virtual world. Essentially, Dunn argues that while virtual actions may not cause direct physical harm, they can still cause psychological harm to other users; this can be enough to make an action wrong in some cases.

One of the most famous examples in the literature of harm involving avatars is the Lambda MOO case. Most famously described by Julian Dibbell (1993), this case involved a user who, by using certain programming abilities inherent in Lambda MOO, managed to use his character to rape and assault two of the other characters in the MOO. Huff, Johnson, and Miller (2003) argue that in this case the virtual harm committed by the avatar clearly led to real world harm; the women in question felt violated because of what had happened to their avatars.³⁰ Similarly, there has been concern about the creation of child avatars in *Second Life* who engage in cybersex with adult avatars; while this not directly harm any children, there is a concern that there is still something wrong with using avatars in this fashion.³¹

Cases such as these are presumably why there is a great deal of interest in justice for harms perpetrated online. Although we do not necessarily believe the harms are great enough to involve police – a virtual rape is relevantly different from a physical rape – there is still a sense that virtual harms must be balanced somehow; some kind of justice is required. Much discussion (Williams 2000; Alemi 2008; Johansson 2009; De Paoli & Kerr 2012) has ensued about how exactly to ensure justice for those in virtual communities, but they share a common belief that moral wrongs can be perpetrated in online communities and must be rectified. To have wronged an avatar may, in some sense, wrong the user who identifies with that avatar – we cannot strictly separate the two.

Our identification with our avatars can, conversely, also affect what we are willing to do with them. As studied by Michael Nagenborg and Christian Hoffstadt (2009), the more you see your avatar as a reflection of yourself, the more your own ethical code will guide its actions. Hence, suppose you strongly identify with a particular character in a game. Suppose further that you, the user, regard torturing others as morally wrong. You are then much less likely to torture characters in that game than a user without those two traits. If you feel very little connection to

³⁰ Strikwerda (2014) argues, interestingly, that while this sort of virtual rape does not constitute rape as commonly understood under the law, it might well constitute sexual harassment due to the real world effects it has on the avatars' users.

³¹This is akin to the concern about virtual child pornography; even if no children are directly involved, some kind of harm seems to be occurring. I take it that the case Strikwerda (2011) makes against virtual child pornography can be extended to cover the sexual use of child avatars in *Second Life*.

your avatar, then you are more likely to see it as purely fiction and thus feel that any action is morally permissible in the circumstances.³²

I believe that this idea is correct as far as it goes, but it focuses mainly on single-avatar virtual worlds such as single-player video games. In order to extend it to virtual worlds involving others, we need to consider their avatars as well. I believe that the extent to which we identify others' avatars with them affects what we are willing to do to them; hence if I see you as a real person, then I am more likely to empathize with you and treat you according to my moral code. If I see you simply as another character in my game, I am less likely to worry about treating you ethically.³³ This parallels our discussion of empathy above. If I see you as lesser (whether in the physical or virtual worlds) I am more willing to harm you; the more I identify your avatar with you, the greater the chance I will see you as a real person, deserving of moral consideration.³⁴

In summary, while avatars are rarely transparent – they retain certain differences from our physical identities – they are translucent to varying degrees. A person can certainly attempt to change or hide aspects of her identity, but this may raise ethical questions depending on the expectations of the surrounding community; if her avatar is expected to be an accurate representation of herself, she has acted deceitfully. Some aspects of identity will shine through, however, even when portraying oneself as drastically different – someone may be playing a mage, but if we engage in a cooperative activity, the player will reveal whether he functions well under stress. This highlights the fact that you cannot totally evade the consequences of your actions towards other avatars, since there are other people behind those avatars. The exact permissible standards will depend on the community, but you are responsible for upholding them, and people may seek justice if you violate those standards.³⁵ As such, there are strong parallels between our identities online and offline. Avatars may mask aspects of our physical identities, but they do not completely replace those identities – they form translucent representations, not opaque ones.

D. Whence Anonymity?

We have established that our online identity is, indeed, rooted in real life; we cannot cleanly divorce the virtual world from the physical world. Yet, a critic may still object that there is surely some disconnect between our physical and virtual identities due to our ability to remain

³² One thing worth remembering is that, as Gorrindo and Groves (2010) note, what we do with our avatars is not literally what we are willing to do in real life; the fact that you are willing to murder someone in a virtual world does not imply you would murder in real life. Your avatar's actions may provide insight into your personality, but they are not a literal map of your actions.

³³ Of course this depends on context – if we are engaged in an elaborate role-playing game based on Renaissance Italy, then even if I see you as a real person, I may be willing to do horrible things to your avatar because the game requires me to emulate the Medici family. However, by participating in the game, you have given tacit consent for those sorts of things to happen; this is not treating the player unethically, even if the ethics used by my avatar may be quite different than the ethics I use in everyday life.

³⁴ I discuss issues of video games and ethics further in [REDACTED].

³⁵ See Preece (2004) for a discussion of differing standards for online interactions. Note that standards for behavior vary in physical communities as well – you are expected to behave differently in an interview setting than you are at a movie with your friends.

anonymous online. This provides a kind of isolation (and thus security) that we lack in most of our physical actions.³⁶

In order to address this concern, we should note that there are two senses in which we can understand anonymity online.³⁷ First, we can take someone to be anonymous online if we cannot link their online actions to an offline identity; we will call this weak anonymity. Second, we can take someone to be anonymous online if none of their actions can be linked either to each other or to a physical person; we will call this strong anonymity. Which of these do users tend to seek?

Online gaming provides prime examples of weak anonymity. In these cases, a user's actions are attributed to their character, but most other users are unable to link that character to a physical person.³⁸ Despite the disconnect from a particular physical person, the user may have a robust online identity; their actions are all being attributed to the same source, even if they cannot be linked to a particular physical person. Frequently weak anonymity is all that people seek. Indeed, as MacKinnon (1995) and Parsell (2008) discuss, reputation is often taken to be quite important online; since we lack the usual social cues on which we base our opinions of people, one of the things that remains is a person's reputation within a community. The actions attributed to a particular avatar or username are often all we have to establish that reputation, giving them an important place in identity-creation online.

Strong anonymity is much more difficult to obtain than weak anonymity, in part because our technical resources for tracing the origin of online communications are increasing. Zheng et al. (2006) note that it is much easier to link writing samples than we think; similarly, we are increasingly able to track IP addresses across communities. Your identity across online sources is difficult to mask unless you keep your contributions very short and can mask where you are posting from. It is also not clear how often this kind of anonymity is sought. Although one might think that strong anonymity would be desired in instances where people are engaging in anti-social behavior, Suler (1998) notes that even in these circumstances people often seek some kind of identity; while being weakly anonymous, they often have a calling card or style that identifies instances of behavior as theirs.³⁹

As such, weak anonymity seems to be the mostly commonly sought type of anonymity. However, it suffices to raise questions about how intertwined our physical and virtual identities are. While there are strong connections between our physical and virtual identities, weak

³⁶ Indeed, even instances where we generally take ourselves to be anonymous, such as being in a crowded public place, are increasingly less so; Doyle and Veranas (2014) discuss the erosion of anonymity that has resulted from the adoption of technologies such as surveillance cameras in public places.

³⁷ Marx (1999) provides a more finely-grained categorization of types of anonymity we can have online; the bifurcated distinction I make here suffices for our purposes.

³⁸ This is not to say that the person would retain this anonymity if there were sufficient reason to try to pierce the veil; law enforcement, for instance, could likely obtain records from the provider that would enable them to associate an account with the user's name. Even if these records were lacking, techniques such as those discussed by Iqbal, Binsalleeh, Fung, and Debbabi (2013) can be used to compare writing samples, although this would in practice require having a specific suspect in mind to compare samples with. The point remains, however, that this kind of anonymity is certainly not absolute.

³⁹ This is presumably akin to graffiti artists who tag their art with an identifying mark; they are, in essence, seeking weak anonymity, not strong anonymity

anonymity is sufficient to create a gap between them. Our online and offline identities are thus intertwined, not indistinguishable.

It is worth noting that even weak anonymity is more difficult to obtain than we often realize; our online trails are becoming easier for others to follow.⁴⁰ This erosion of online anonymity is a mixed blessing. As people become aware that their actions are traceable, there will likely be a lessening of anti-social behavior. This may well be a very positive result for online communities as a whole. However, there is a downside as well. The virtual world has great potential to aid our attempts to figure out who we are. While I have argued that our online identities are rooted in the physical world, I follow Martin (2004), Savin-Baden (2010), and Yurchisin et al. (2005) in emphasizing the place of possible identities, not simply current ones. If a person wishes to be a bit more outgoing and assertive, he can try it out online. There is thus currently a kind of safe space online for previewing these changes to who he is. Since online interactions are usually archived, the decrease in anonymity may result in an identity which can be traced across online communities and across many years.

There is thus a certain loss of freedom inherent in the piercing of anonymity. Whereas once a small town pariah could start over in a new city, now her embarrassment can be preserved on YouTube forever. This is inhibiting to identity creation – if we worry too much about how an action will appear to others or in the future, then it is hard to see ourselves as going through an authentic process of self-understanding. It is possible new safeguards will emerge, but at the moment the potential consequences are troubling.⁴¹

E. Reconceiving the Relationship

The fact that people use online communities in part to try out possible identities points to a somewhat more complex relationship between online and offline identities than I have thus far emphasized. The metaphor of transparency/translucency/opacity is useful so far as it goes, however, it runs the risk of making identity seem purely a fact of the offline world: we have an identity, and then we may choose to reveal or obscure it online. This makes online identity seem like a window into offline identity, but the truth is more complicated.

Our identities are not static and, as such, are influenced by many factors. This includes the reactions of others in the virtual communities we belong to. Lomborg (2012) discusses Simmel's view of the self as expressed by the relationships we have with others. One of the avenues for creating and understanding the self, according to Lomborg, is through the relationships and self-expression we have online. While I have explicitly discussed identity play

⁴⁰ Indeed, as I noted, even with the video game example there is some risk of your physical identity being revealed – in general there is a database somewhere that links the online and offline identities, since there is usually someone keeping track of how you are paying them or retaining an email address in case you forget your password. While there are ways to circumvent this, they are decreasing as time progresses.

⁴¹ Note that the negative effects may be worth it, depending on what we gain by releasing anonymity – I agree with Brian Choi (2013) that there are tradeoffs involved, including a tradeoff between anonymity and what he calls generativity, namely, the ability to use the Internet in new and creative ways with others. Blindly protecting anonymity may result in greater harms if, for instance, online communities become so hostile that many potential users simply decline to participate at all. It is a delicate balancing act.

and reflection in avatar-based communities, we should also note that it also occurs frequently in non-avatar-based communities.

Both social media sites and personal blogs have a performative aspect to their identity disclosure – they are centered around the individual who is disclosing information. This disclosure, however, is less like a monologue than a dialogue in many cases, because it is influenced by a number of factors. First, the information which a person discloses may be shaped in part by the expectations of the platform. Bakardjieva and Gaden (2012) note that sites such as MySpace ask users to disclose their favorite bands, movies, etc.; this guides users' expectations of what is appropriate to disclose. Second, a person may also alter what they share in response to feedback from others in the community. Lomborg (2012) notes that a blogger may well adjust what content she shares depending on whether her readers find it interesting; she is carefully presenting a selection of material based on what appeals to those reading her. More generally, there is a tendency to curate what we present on social media – we do not necessarily present everything, but a carefully selected subset which we believe will appeal to others or present us in the way we wish.

The presentation of only a select portion of our experiences does not, of course, imply that other experiences do not exist, nor is it unique to online self-expression. We choose what information to share with our bosses, our friends, relative strangers, and so forth; the fact that we tailor our presentation to particular communities does not remove the existence of other aspects of our identity. Yet, online experiences have, as Janice Richardson puts it, “become part of our routine of life.” (Richardson 2011, p. 525) As such, they contribute to, not merely reflect, the identities we have. The fact that I see certain aspects of my life as desirable to share in some contexts may spill over into others; I may seek out experiences that I think will be appreciated by members of my online community. Just as an avatar may express a self I wish to have, so too a positive response to my online self-presentation may reinforce a particular picture of which aspects of my self are desirable.

More worryingly, both Rodogno (2012) and Floridi (2011) have noted that the ability to store and freeze narratives about our lives, as social media does, may influence our identities and our ability to change ourselves. Just as the piercing of anonymity threatens our ability to try on multiple identities, so too does the preservative nature of many of the online forums we use. While posts on social media or internet forums may seem ephemeral – after all, they are quickly replaced on our feed by others – they are indexed and preserved, frequently even in the face of attempts by the users to delete them. As such, a particular online self-presentation may be difficult to escape; this can effect what selves we see as possible in the future. The offline self can be strongly constrained by the online self. We are not passively exhibiting the offline self through the window of online interactions; much like vines growing together, each identity actively affects the shape of the other.

F. Conclusion

To truly understand our identities, we must consider the communities we belong to and our interactions with others; since the virtual world is increasingly a part of our lives, our online interactions must be included. I have argued that our virtual and physical identities are tightly

intertwined. The touted differences of behavior and presentation online are not as great as they appear; the same characteristics that encourage antisocial behavior online do so in the physical world. Furthermore, while deception is possible online, it is both difficult to sustain and rooted in our conceptions and understanding of the physical world. As such, while there is space between our physical and virtual representations, the two are not sharply divided.

Furthermore, while weak anonymity does suffice to allow for deceptive portrayals, it is harder to attain than many think; our ability to cross-reference samples of text or visual identifiers is eroding our current anonymity. In the future, we may need to be more careful online, as we will likely be held more responsible than at present. This may serve to bring our physical and virtual actions in line with each other, although at a certain price: our ability to use virtual worlds for identity experimentation will diminish.

Steven G. Jones writes that “the Internet is not a social world unto itself... it is part and parcel of a social world.” (Jones 1997, p. 30) The same is true of virtual identity. Our online identities are not creations unto themselves, untouched by the physical world. Rather, they too are products of that world. They may reflect who we are, who we would like to be, or our perceptions of what it is like to be someone else. Depending on the response of others in our communities, we may adapt ourselves offline to reflect our online presentations, or we may feel bound by our online self-expressions of the past. The virtual self is neither a fantastic creation of our imagination nor a mere reflection of the physical self; in this world with increasingly blurry boundaries between online and offline worlds, our virtual and physical identities are tightly intertwined.

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