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- 1 This paper explores the implications of avatar use on self-presentation, drawing particular attention to paradoxes at play in participants' relationships to their avatars, as well as in their relationship to other players and their avatars, which simultaneously conjure up notions of identification and distance, physical body and represented body, real space and fictional space, truth and pretense.
- 2 Our exploration starts from a subject matter that has been a focus of our research in recent years, namely the emotions and feelings experienced through persistent-world avatars or video-game characters either as a result of meeting another player or of the way the character or storyline is scripted. During interviews, participants on platforms such as *Second Life* (Linden Lab, since 2003) as well as players embodying characters in adventure role-playing games talk about the intensity of the experience and express their surprise at experiencing emotions that are not originally their own. The result is an uncanny experience of dissociation, in which players feel and see themselves feeling at the same time, or see what their avatar (or character) is feeling while feeling it themselves at the same time.
- 3 The puzzling question of who is feeling what, raised by front-stage/back-stage dynamics, and by the relationship between the actor and her part, opens up a conversation about the intimacy, or ineffability, that defines an individual's relationship to their avatar. The common understanding of the avatar as an

instrument, a means to an end, or a proxy mechanically obeying its operator, is hence challenged: the avatar comes to life.

- 4 This discussion will be informed by an exploration of the phenomenon of multiple identity and of the notion of dissociation in contemporary scientific literature, as we draw a parallel with possession phenomena and out-of-body travel in traditional societies. This anthropological approach will lead us to move away from classical Western-based ethnocentric positions that have largely pathologized dissociative processes and the phenomenon of multiple identities. The purpose of this paper is to anchor these behaviors in their specific cultural contexts.

Emotional aftershock: falling in love with a fictional character

- 5 In a recently updated paper (Schmoll, 2020), we based our research on an account by Swedish media and design researcher Annika Waern (2011) which described her participation in the video game *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009). In this game, the player's character meets various computer-animated companions who help her in her quest, while the storyline lets players develop romantic relationships between their characters and one or more NPCs (non-player characters). Waern chose to embark on such a romance which she later neglected, taken up as she was by the quest, so that her virtual "boyfriend" ultimately ended up breaking up with her. Waern notes that this outcome affected her more intensely than one might expect of a relationship with a fictional character, and despite her own initial aloofness. As the title of her article makes clear, Waern "fell in love with someone who does not exist." Following this experience, Waern began to scour online forums dedicated to the game and discovered that other players, much like herself, described being attached to certain characters beyond reason, with comments expressing their own surprise at harboring feelings for fictional beings. Caught in a double bind, as it were, between loving and playing, some players even renounced winning the game to prevent their beloved character from sacrificing itself. Others expressed having a hard time beginning a new game and choosing a romantic option involving a different character.
- 6 This trend calls into question one of the defining features of games: second degree (Brougère, 2005). "Playing pretend" is arguably what lets players claim that they are not really invested in the characters they play, in the choices they make, and in the actions they perform. This also goes for the emotions that they express which they can claim not to feel. However, Mike Pohjola (2004), quoted by Waern (2011), argues that "the longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe." In other words, emotions can be elicited by playing a part, and take the player by surprise. While players may consider that these emotions are not their own, because the game is only "make-believe," they are no less emotions experienced by the character, or emotions that the player experiences as coming from the character. Pohjola argues that the player is "pretending to pretend to be the character": the player is pretending that the emotions she is experiencing are not hers. But with a slight shift of perspective, it can also be argued that the character's characteristics, its interactions with others, and its narrative arc force these emotions upon its operator. The same also goes for stage actors, in a different setting: the actor playing a part accepts an intimate contract by

which she lets her character take hold of her, to the point that she can be moved to laughter, to tears, or to rage in unison with her part.

- 7 Like actors on a stage, gamers playing “ready-to-play” characters (Perény & Amato, 2010, p. 96) with pre-established narrative arcs are acting out characters whose features escape their control. Players do not author the storylines their characters follow and have less freedom than actors in how they act out their parts. However, even when presented with a gallery of pre-established characters, gamers can choose their own characters and engage with them, instead of remaining mere onlookers. They experience an alternative life, all the more different from their own in that they did not author it, leaving that task to a developer instead.
- 8 At first sight, the difference between character and player seems more tangible in a video game than the difference that separates an avatar from its operator in a universe like *Second Life*, and seems more conducive to the kind of split experience that consists in simultaneously acting and observing oneself act. Eladhari & Lindley (2003) therefore argue that video games fail to achieve deep immersion. Zach Waggoner (2009) insists on the contrary that this divide allows players to express a different identity, which they can act out in the game.
- 9 This idea has been taken up by Annika Waern through the concept of the *bleed*, a term originally used within role-playing communities. One might also speak of “transfusion,” in keeping with its etymology, to refer to the permeable membrane that separates players from their characters. The term suggests that games create an alibi for exploring emotionally complex or sensitive issues (Montola, 2010; Bowman, 2013). Games make it possible to both erect a barrier between reality and fiction and to tear it down, in the sense that players are “actually” experiencing the emotions they are simulating on behalf of their character. This mechanism makes it possible for players to safely “let go” inside a space that guarantees that whatever feelings they are experiencing stem from someplace else. When an individual experiences emotions that they did not suspect they could have, their surprise is all the greater.

Avatar love: who is feeling what?

- 10 The above experiences depict players’ relationships with computer-animated artifacts. Do these descriptions overlap with relationships taking place between avatars controlled by “real” people?
- 11 One of our more recent papers (Nachez & Schmoll, 2020) set out the lessons drawn from a participant observation in *Second Life* which involved a romantic relationship between two people, experienced through their avatars. This paper also referred to a 2009 documentary program which showed the double lives—on screen and in real life—of three households in which *Second Life* had become a part of the families’ daily lives.¹ The camera follows three players as they share moments that are at once virtual and very private (and sometimes disturbing). Behind the username Quecœur, we find a loving and faithful wife who spends her evenings on *Second Life* flirting with muscular hunks. Her husband watches over her shoulder, talks with her, gives her advice, comforts her when her affairs end in heartbreak. Responses from viewers came as no great surprise, as they expressed disbelief, deprecative judgments, and mockery largely equating the behavior in question with a pathology. An anthropological perspective

must move away from such biases and consider them instead as tools to decipher social norms.

- 12 Amaranta Cecchini (2015) has turned her attention to these virtual-romance games, with her approach usefully identifying several types of romantic involvement. Her research is based on interviews with people involved, or once involved, in a romantic relationship with a partner encountered on *Second Life*. She identifies three types of experiences: offline, online, and fictional romantic involvement.
- Members of the first group engage in online relationships with the intention to pursue them *offline*, in real life, or “IRL,” to borrow from gamers’ vocabulary. Individuals that belong to this group ultimately plan on meeting face to face, leaving open the possibility for disappointment or for a validation of feelings that first emerged online. This can lead to biographical changes (e.g., separation from one’s spouse).
 - To avoid the disappointments of a real-life encounter, and/or to avoid impacting their real lives, other gamers’ relationships are pursued *exclusively online*, and the feelings they develop are confined to that space. No plans are made to meet offline; the virtualization of the other facilitates idealization, written exchanges intensify the expression of feelings without potential disappointments after meeting IRL, and the online experience does not lead to any changes in real life. Feelings are nevertheless experienced as authentic and as pertaining to those who experience them. These feelings are aimed at another person, on the other side of the screen, through the mediation of avatars viewed as mere proxies.
 - The third group is made up of people involved in *fictional* romantic relationships, i.e., people who claim not to be personally involved in the relationship in question. They “pretend” to be in love: the avatars are the ones getting involved, sleeping together, getting married, etc.—not the players. The simulation is fully completed and includes the simulation of feelings. Compared to the previous type of online involvement, participants are more securely concealed behind their avatars, which they do not view as proxies, but as characters, in the manner of the video game described above.
- 13 The differences between these three types of involvement have significant psychological and relational implications. In the case of online involvement, for instance, feelings are “authentic” and are liable to lead to conflicts in real life if the dividing line is overlooked: a RL spouse who discovers that their partner is involved in an online relationship can legitimately view it as emotional infidelity. Conversely, in fictional involvement, a partner who is caught by their RL spouse might defend themselves by arguing that it’s all just a game: the avatars are in love, not the operators.
- 14 In the above-mentioned documentary, the protagonists’ shared involvement, on either side of the screen, seems to fall in line with the “fictional romantic involvement” model. The young woman “playing” under the username Quecœur is emotionally involved in the virtual relationships she develops and has lost the distance assumed to be implied by any game. Arguably, this also applies to other activities, any time the excitement of a game leads participants to be overcome by their emotions: in video games, sports competitions, or during a show. While a reductive interpretation might describe the husband’s presence as voyeurism, his role also recalls that of gamemaster or a coach: reminding players of the boundary between reality and fiction, and sustaining the cathartic and/or interpretative possibilities of the game.

- 15 But do these various frameworks match the reality of the protagonists' experience? Can emotions arise by proxy, between avatars, without being experienced by their operators? Following observations by Mike Pohjola (2004), quoted above discussing identity in role-playing games, could it be that the model of fictional involvement lets operators "pretend to pretend to be the character," like in a video game?
- 16 To overcome this paradox, we must try to move away from the notion that the virtual world is a communication tool that lets humans interact by proxy, as if avatars were mere instruments or means to an end. It hence seems interesting to draw on the approach suggested by the actor-network theory (Latour, 1991), which ascribes an equally legitimate ontological value to non-humans and humans alike. The online social world can then be described as a world inhabited by avatars: non-humans controlled by humans who nevertheless pursue their own lives, in accordance with the conditions that apply within this specific space—including the roles and expectations ascribed to them by other agents (humans and avatars).
- 17 From this point of view, the avatar, rather than the operator, will have its heart broken. Admittedly, the operator is the one losing sleep and appetite, in her RL body. This raises the question: can or should feelings evidently experienced by the operator be presented as being primarily experienced by the avatar? Why suggest that avatars are genuinely experiencing feelings that operators are only considered to experience vicariously?
- 18 In *Second Life*, like in any role-playing game, individuals design their avatars, define their features and appearance, act out their part, and decide how they should act. Once the character has been designed, it is thrown into a sea of encounters with other avatars: from that point on, the relationships it develops depend as much on the primary intentions of its operator as on the reactions, responses, and expectations that the avatar itself elicits from others—since only the avatar can be seen. And since the same goes for other participants and their avatars, the relational drama at play between the avatars ends up unraveling between the avatars and largely escaping their operators. It logically follows from this that *Second Life* avatar operators, like role players or stage actors, can experience emotions that seemingly belong to their characters.
- 19 In a play or a scripted video game, characters' emotions and feelings are dictated by the script. Instead of involving a fixed storyline, *Second Life* relies on an intricate network of roles and mutual expectations that set up the equivalent of an improv stage, where performers are moved by the characters they play. The avatar acts, experiments with extravagant choices and situations, engages in queer and SM practices, dominance or submission: practices that individuals might be less inclined to pursue in real life, and which can be experienced by proxy, from a spectator's point of view. Expressing emotions is also made easier by other avatars: their operators allow them to play along, to the extent that they also consider the emotions not to be addressed to them, but to their character instead.
- 20 The relation of otherness which binds the operator to their character suggests that the character is seen as a separate entity. This is also true of how other participants' characters are viewed. The projection of feelings and emotions onto "real-life" participants assumed to pull the strings behind their avatars is only partial: the other's avatar constitutes the primary object of the individual's feelings and emotions.

- 21 The impression of autonomy generated by the avatar is amplified by the program itself, which makes the avatar move automatically. Avatars are partially animated by a computer routine, independently of the operator's actions. Even when the operator is not using their avatar, the avatar never stands still. Just like in certain video games, it moves, shifts from one foot to another, and changes posture, thereby giving the impression that it is waiting for some kind of instruction from its operator. And waiting presupposes a waiting *subject*.

Dissociation and multiple identities

- 22 One key aspect of online social worlds, as experienced through individuals' respective avatars, seems to be an identity split, which participants might describe as follows: avatars go through experiences that escape their operators. Avatars lead their own lives, and it is only second-handedly that operators, sometimes involuntarily and out of empathy for their avatars, come to experience what the avatars are feeling.
- 23 From an anthropological point of view, this relational dynamic brings to mind the phenomenon of multiple personalities described in the field of psychopathology as well as in the observation of traditional societies, and which presently and in our region of the globe falls under the designation of *dissociative identity disorder* or DID, according to the categories set out by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM, starting with its 4th version, in 1994). An individual with DID no longer says "I ...," when she moves her arm: instead, her arm moves, and she feels it moving of its own accord. Contrary to what happens in a degenerative disease, bodily functions remain biologically intact. However, the dissociation can be more severe: memories, thoughts, and behaviors that successively disappear from one's ordinary personality gradually organize, as if through a will of their own, into a second personality. This process leads the subject to display two or more personalities, in the sense that each of the two clearly distinct sets of behaviors can express a self and say "I." Since the subject cannot consciously experience the two personalities at once, the second personality manifests itself through a crisis that momentarily erases the first personality. The subject therefore generally has no recollection of the episode. In some cases, however, the first personality sticks around and is able to watch on as the events unfold. The subject then experiences the intrusion as emanating from an external source with whom she may even sometimes interact.
- 24 DID is one of the most controversial disorders listed in the DSM. It was long considered that subjects were simulating their multiple personalities, with a handful of infamous cases wrapped up in scandal and exposed as a hoax: as in the case of Sybil, a patient who claimed to have sixteen multiple personalities, and who became the focus of a best-selling book written by her therapist. She later turned out to have simulated these (Nathan, 2011). Yet studies based on physiological data have suggested that genuine DID subjects were not simulating extra personalities. Frank W. Putnam *et al.* (1990) argue that different personalities elicit different galvanic skin responses and brainwave patterns. Anedore Hopper *et al.* (2002) compared the brainwaves of individuals claiming to have DID with the brainwaves of actors simulating personality changes. Brainwave pattern variations in individuals genuinely harboring multiple personalities do not overlap with the patterns observed in individuals merely playing out a scene.

- 25 Dissociative identity disorders hence refer to phenomena wherein mental functions organize into distinct personalities. From an anthropological point of view, psychopathology's failure to understand these phenomena lies in the critical weight of culturally grounded ways of thinking. In Western culture, the traditional assumption is that of a single personality: claims of having more than one personality spontaneously raise suspicions of simulation. If the personality split is not feigned, it must be pathological. However, if we attempt to move away from the "self-evidence" of a unified self, these disorders can be interpreted from a systematic standpoint which views the human being as an organic and cognitive apparatus: one that no doubt usually produces a single personality in its relations to its environment and to itself, but one that can also produce several personalities in order to adapt to constraining circumstances.
- 26 Dissociative disorders, from a scientific standpoint, play an adaptive role. They can most often be traced back to a traumatic origin (Hilgard, 1977; Dell & O'Neil, 2009). A rape or a serious accident can lead to a dissociative episode in any individual. In the face of disaster, dissociation is a typical reaction. Individuals see themselves from outside their bodies, passively enduring the situation over which they have no control, while at the same time experiencing it from a witness's point of view. The ins and outs of this defense mechanism can be found both in its pathological expression—all the way through to psychosis—as well as in the gaming patterns observed above. A common aspect of these various forms is to generate the impression of "being elsewhere" or "being other." In most cases, an individual with no underlying condition ends up recovering all of his or her functions.

Multiple personalities in pre-modern thought

- 27 Before multiple personality phenomena became the object of nosographic approaches depicting them as a pathological condition, this behavior was known to pre-modern societies, where it was understood as a part of everyday life.
1. The term *possession* refers to a situation in which a person is inhabited by one or several supernatural entities: deity, spirit, ancestor, demon, who control the person's body, speaking and acting through it (Hell, 1999; Deligné, 2013; Bercé, 2018). Depending on the case, the possessed individual's ordinary personality is cut off from his or her consciousness, so that they later have no recollection of the event, or watch it unfolding as if from the backseat of a vehicle at the hands of the entity manifesting itself. Most of the time, possession occurs in a state of trance, which may be involuntary or caused by techniques involving a ritual, in which music and dance often play an important role. The benefits, in terms of cathartic release, relief from anxiety, and the removal of psychological and somatic symptoms, have led psychotherapists to use trance, induced by rhythmical music and dance techniques, for therapeutic purposes (Schott-Billmann, 1977; Fiore, 2000).
 2. In a sense limited to its original cultural context, the technique of *shamanism* is specific to Siberian hunter populations and to the Tungusic people in particular. It consists in calling upon supernatural spirits during a state of trance (Hamayon, 2002, 2015). The term has been extended beyond its original context to include comparable practices found in Hmong (Moréchand, 1968), Native-American (Blanc, 1994), and New Age cultures. In comparison to what happens in possession, the shaman connects with

spirits in the supernatural world by changing into an animal and obtaining from the spirits the promise of game, cure, or counsel. The shaman generally benefits from the help of an “electing spirit” (Hamayon, 2002, 2015) personally bound to him and who protects him, as well as from auxiliary spirits from which he obtains specific services.

- 28 The shamanic journey requires the shaman to exit his body: he will start to shake, and perform disorderly movements that give him the appearance of a madman, though he behaves normally in everyday life. Journeys of the soul, prevalent across all cultures, suggest a dissociation of body and mind, as the trance causes the latter to depart from its corporeal body.
- 29 Both shamanic trance and possession have been the focus of psychotherapeutic approaches (Hell & Collot, 2011).

Similarities between dissociative situations and avatar practices

- 30 The comparison between avatar experience and shamanic possession, or “travel,” opens up new and fruitful avenues of research that fall out of reach of a strict reading of dissociative phenomena through the lens of psychopathology. Anthropology reverses or combines interpretative grids, stressing the Roman and monotheistic heritage of scientific thought in its concept of a single “self” lodged inside a single physical body, and in its steadfast distinction between the real world and the imaginary. Because of this assumption, possession phenomena can only be interpreted from our Western perspective in the light of psychopathology or superstition, rife with hypnoidal overtones. Although escaping into other lives remains possible—our thoughts and dreams offer a way out into imaginary worlds—these worlds are defined as fictional. Choosing to remain in fiction, identifying too intensely with your avatar in *Second Life*, or spending most of your time in front of a screen are reason enough to raise concerns of addiction and thereby stress the unrealistic nature of this kind of behavior—adding to this the fact that prolonged participation will cause physical strain and put the player at the risk of falling ill or even dying.
- 31 However, another approach can be taken up, which insists on the many worlds and lives we experience. This reading has been made easier by the current possibility of inhabiting virtual worlds and of acting out identities other than the one which prevails in our everyday lives.
- 32 The French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann (2008) has taken issue with the widespread injunction to “be ourselves.” Such a demand relies on the premise that individuals only have one true “self” which they must embrace. While identity does exist as a result of one’s past, individuals can also undergo radical changes, brought on by events or encounters. We may aspire to “be ourselves,” but we are also continually running from a single, restrictive identity. We refuse to be captive to the single image others throw back at us, as shown by research on the psychological violence of ascription mechanisms.
- 33 This approach is consistent with the notion of *subpersonality* developed by certain branches of psychotherapy (Rowan, 1990; Lester 2017, 2019) which draw on the work of Carl Gustav Jung and the notion of *possible self* used in cognitive psychology (Dunkel & Kerpelman, 2006). According to these approaches, personality is developed as a result

of an internal dialogue between various components, such as our “shadow side,” or our “inner child.” Maturity comes with choosing a given personality, while possible selves within us will go on demanding to be actualized.

- 34 In this context, avatars allow us to experience numerous lives and different aspects of ourselves, providing individuals with the alternative bodies necessary to do so, as part of a virtual life that is no less experienced than so-called real life. Why is the impression of living an authentic experience so vivid? Seeing that individuals only have one body, real life can be defined as the experience of one personality which overshadows the others. This personality is real to the extent that our “career,” in the sociological sense of the term, drives us to make certain choices, although others were possible.
- 35 Avatars in online virtual worlds can also be compared to other figures similarly involving a relationship to a physical proxy: puppets, dolls, figurines representing us in a board game, in a virtual space, or in a conversation with others. This is also true of costumes, in which an individual dons the attributes of another: characters in a play, roles, protagonists in “live-action” games, masks, and the simple substitute identity or anonymity provided by a username.
- 36 All these practices involve a similar process of dissociation between a representative (the avatar, in the present case) and the self, which is pushed to the background. This split, or *spaltung* (to use the term psychoanalysis has borrowed from the psychology of consciousness) between a representative on a stage and that which remains behind the scenes (the self) creates a divide between the stage, where the representative performs his or her actions, and that which is withheld.
- 37 This approach is another way of drawing on Erving Goffman’s theatrical metaphor (1959). Virtual worlds allow us to play parts and at the same time to become aware of the parts we play in everyday life. This realization draws a dividing line not only between the avatar and the self, but between the stage where the avatar performs and the stage of our everyday lives, where we act out our “self.” Multiple identities, which place the self on a par with the other personalities actualized by avatars, suggest a mystery of the self and subject. The subject, pulling the strings from behind the scenes, is also being played by its numerous personalities.

Summary

- 38 Technological avatarization is one of many invented methods that human beings use to explore themselves, through emotions which they can freely curb or intensify depending on the relationship that binds them to their virtual proxy. The experience of emotions and feelings perceived as alien to oneself and ascribed to the avatar raises the paradoxical question of their truth or authenticity (a player cannot pretend to have these feelings—unless they are pretending to pretend). It simultaneously raises the question of *who* is experiencing these feelings: the avatar (the character) or the player? The ability to shift from one identity to another ultimately raises the abysmal question of self-continuity across multiple identities, and of the consistency of this “self.”
- 39 Traditional societies see no anomaly in the idea that the body may harbor multiple identities, or that a single subject is able to migrate from one body to another. The dividing line they draw between the everyday world and other possible worlds is not as

stark as ours. Anthropological approaches must then examine multiple identity phenomena and avatar practices in a way that takes into account differences in interpretative frameworks. In cultures other than our Western one, avatars can be viewed as an opportunity to bring to life other identities than the ones we usually allow. The common notion that an individual only possesses but a single self—an assumption barely challenged by the psychoanalytical claim of a conflict between consciousness and the unconscious, or between the “self” and the “id” (one self, one id)—now appears as a worldview grounded in a specific time and place, which the exploration of avatar practices makes possible to deconstruct. In this way, each society’s understanding of avatar practices, which emerged in the West but are present across the globe, could serve as an analyzer, in the sense of a revelatory instrument, of various cultural mindsets and various perceptions of the human subject.

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NOTES

1. "Quecœur et les garçons," episode filmed by Safia Kessas and produced by RTBF as part of the Belgian TV series "Tout ça ne nous rendra pas le Congo," 2009.

ABSTRACTS

This paper looks into the implications of avatarization regarding self-construction and self-presentation, based on personal experiences and observations conducted in a virtual world (*Second Life*), observations and conversations with other gamers, and an exploration of the paradoxes at play in participants' relationships to their avatars, as well as in their relationship to other players and their avatars, which simultaneously conjure up notions of identification and distance, truth and pretense, "real" and "substitute" relationships. Our analysis first focuses on the emotions and feelings experienced through persistent-world avatars or video-game characters, drawing distinctions between the different types of involvement likely to bind individuals to their virtual stand-ins. The genuine experience of emotions and feelings raises the paradoxical question of their authenticity (a player cannot pretend to be experiencing such feelings—unless they are pretending to pretend). It simultaneously raises the question of *who* is experiencing these feelings: the avatar (the character) or the player? The ability to shift from one identity to another ultimately raises the abysmal question of self-continuity across multiple identities, and of the consistency of this "self." This discussion will be informed by an exploration of the phenomenon of multiple identity and of the notion of dissociation in contemporary scientific literature, as we draw a parallel with possession phenomena and out-of-body travel in traditional societies.

INDEX

Keywords: avatars, video game character, multiple identities, dissociation (dissociative disorder), *Second Life*, video games, emotional design

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