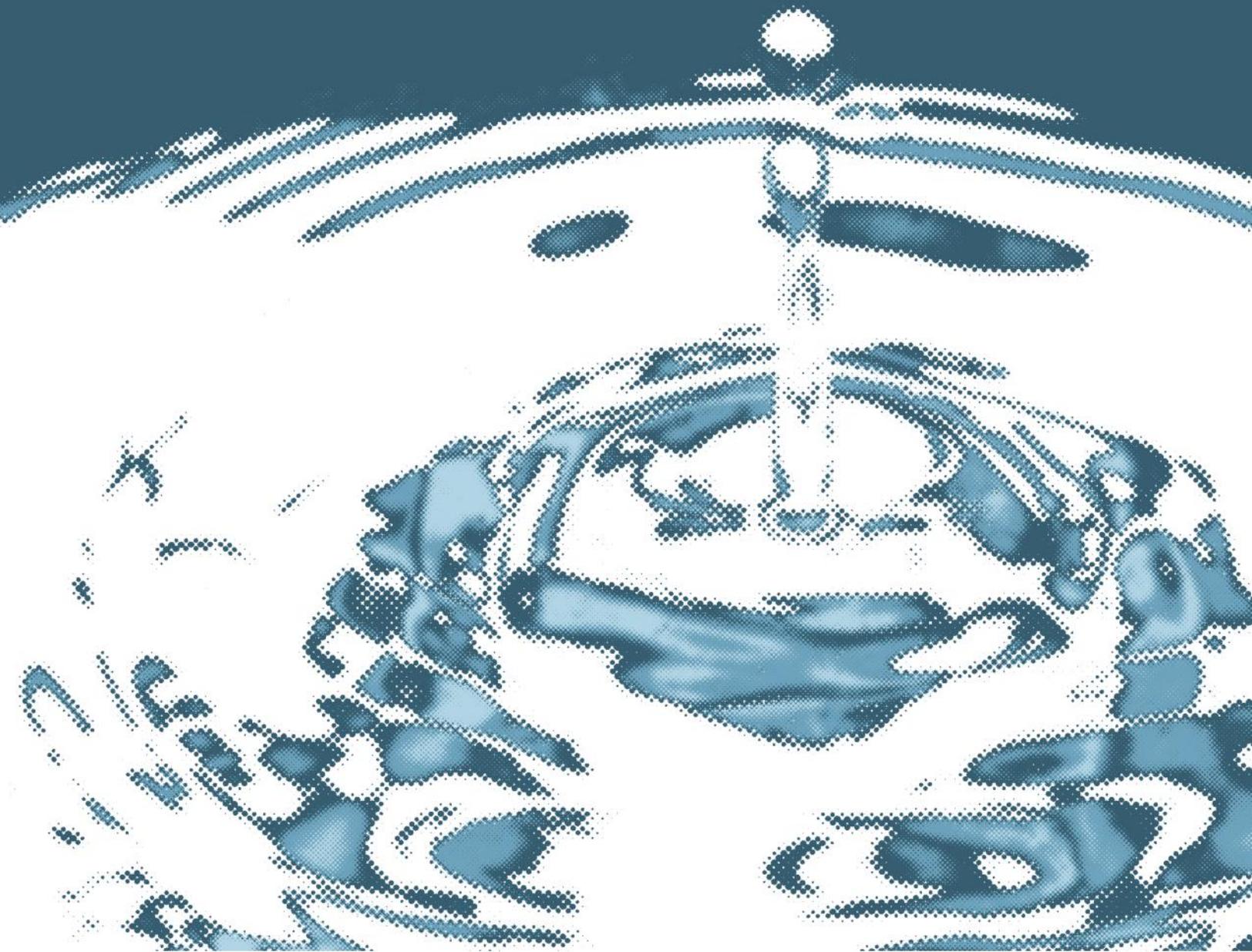


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Virtual Identity: Applying Narrative Theory to Online Character Development

Stephanie Yumansky

The creation of a virtual identity involves the complex process of constructing an online self-presentation that encapsulates how we want others to perceive us. The computer enables users to embody a virtual identity that they may not be able to portray in real life, facilitating the exploration of multiple roles and identities. Thus with the recent prevalence of Multi-User Domains (MUDs) and Massively Multi-Player Online Games (MMOGs) such as *Second Life*, gamers are crafting identities online, digressing from their actual identities in real life (RL). By examining narrative theory and applying it as a conceptual framework for this paper, I show how the narrative device of character can be used as a lens to explore this crafting of virtual identity. I also examine the ways in which virtual identities can impact and influence RL identities. In her book *Life on the Screen* (1995), Sherry Turkle examines the creation of identity online, describing the shifting relationship between people and computers. Turkle explores how virtual realms are causing a reevaluation of personal identity and the way it is constructed. I will examine Sherry Turkle's work to highlight that while online constructions might blur the lines between RL and virtual reality, they can also contribute to a player's personal development. In order to explain this phenomenon, I will apply aspects of character development derived from narrative theory as a means to understand whether gamers participate in virtual narrative development in a way that crafts character when constructing virtual identity.

Before delving into the realm of virtual identity, it is important to examine narrative theory and the role of character in narrative analysis. Narrative can be broadly defined as a recorded story or other form of communication that presents a sequence of events usually caused and experienced by characters (Jahn, 2005, N1.2). Types of narratives can include films, novels, plays and comic strips. In addition, author Gerard Genette (1972) explains that there are three central interpretations associated with narrative. First, the most commonly used meaning refers to the narrative statement, performed in either oral or written form, which tells the story of an event or series of events. The second meaning, which is popular among contemporary analysts, involves an analysis of the actions and situations of a narrative. The third and oldest meaning of narrative refers to an event that consists of someone recounting something: "the act of narrating taken in itself" (Genette, p. 26).



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In providing a structural description, narratives are dissected into different parts and examined according to various functions and relationships that exist between those components. This process of dissection and evaluation is referred to as *narratology*, or the theory of the structure of narratives. Genette (1972) explains that, despite various interpretations of narrative theory, it is only narrative discourse that can be used to engage in textual analysis. Analyzing narrative discourse involves the process of studying the relationship between “narrative and story, narrative and narrating, and between story and narrating” (Genette, p. 29). Narratology relies on the relationship between what is being narrated, known as the “story,” and how it is being narrated, referred to as “narrative discourse.”

Implicitly, both story and narrative discourse are highly reliant on character, and the interdependency between narrative and story highlights the importance of the role of character within narrative theory. In narratological terms, a character can be identified as an actor with distinctive human characteristics: “It has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics which make psychological and ideological description possible” (Bal, 1985, p. 80). Indeed, theorist Mieke Bal defines a narrative in terms of the agent that relates it, noting that the presence of characters – broadly defined as fictional beings created by an author and existing within fictional texts – is an essential characteristic of a narrative. Thus the narrative device of character is commonly employed as an element of narrative theory used to dissect and analyze narrative texts. Characters are involved in stories or narratives by being agents or causing an event, by being beneficiaries of or being affected by an event, or being victims (Jahn, 2005, N7.1). Characterization analysis examines the ways that personality traits of fictional characters are constructed, in particular, according to Jahn, by asking the question, who characterizes whom as being what?

There are a number of ways in which characterization analysis is approached. One way is through the examination of description, dialogue and action. The two central methods of characterization are the author’s description of the character’s physical and personal attributes and their behavior. Berger (1997) notes that “Through characters’ actions, readers get a sense of what they are like by interpreting those actions according to the readers’ own moral codes and value systems” (p. 52). Characterization can also be determined by what characters reveal about themselves and may be used to understand the motivation behind a character’s actions. In this way, the behavior of a character is connected to his or her personality so that their actions seem plausible.

Characterization analysis can also focus on uncovering the ways and means of constructing personality traits of fictional characters. This type of analysis focuses on three main analytic distinctions: *narratorial* versus *figural* characterization questions the identity of the characterizing subject; *explicit* versus *implicit* characterization addresses whether the character's personality traits are written, as in block characterization, or assumed based on behavior; and *self/auto-characterization* versus *altero-characterization* deals with whether the character personifies its creator or someone entirely different (Jahn, 2005, N7.1).

In character analysis, characters can also be categorized based on personal characteristics or types. For example, emphasis can be placed on defining characters based on traits of depth or sophistication, as exemplified in the distinction of flat versus round characters. Flat or static characters are single-dimensional figures with a limited range of speech and actions (Jahn, 2005, N7.4). Typically, flat characters are grouped into types such as “the jock” or “the housewife.” Flat characters are sometimes used to build comic effect in a plot, and they do not develop as the narrative progresses. Contrastingly, round or dynamic characters are three-dimensional figures characterized by various, and at times conflicting, attributes (Jahn, N7.6). Unlike flat characters, round characters cannot be defined according to a specific type, and they usually develop throughout the course of the narrative.

In this analysis of gamer characterization, it is also useful to consider the character as a narrative device in film. Within the context of acting, characterization refers to an actor's ability to inhabit a character (Manderino, 1985, p. 101). A natural and convincing portrayal of a character creates an illusion, for the audience, that the actor is actually possessed by the character on screen. Thus, the ability to create and develop a character enables an actor to enhance standard material or character types by providing more substance than originally provided. In this way, actors have the power to advance and develop a narrative by creating diverse, round characters.

The construction of a character often involves an actor creating a back-story or history of his or her character. For example, some actors draw on method acting as a formal way to develop their characters and advance the narrative. Instead of emphasizing the verbal interpretation of a writer's work, method acting stresses giving precedence to the inner interpretation of the writer's intentions, which generates acting behavior in a naturalistic way. Method acting is a technique that stems from its ability to inspire individuality among the actors who follow it (Manderino, 1985, p. viii). Even if a character is lacking depth regarding past experiences, it is common and

beneficial for an actor to fill in the blanks by crafting a narrative for their character's past, present and future. Furthermore, method actors are also encouraged to investigate the various ways that their own personality may influence the way they approach a character. Actors are encouraged to develop the inner qualities of their character by utilizing their own experiences and by being personally aware (Easty, 1981, p. 158).

Another way for actors to engage with their characters is by uncovering the physical traits of the character (e.g., through wardrobe and prop experimentation; Easty, 1981, p. 189) thus “working from the outside and then going inwards” (Manderino, 1985, p. 105). This is based on the idea that, for an audience, the physical attributes reflect the inner qualities of a character. Method acting stresses that in finding certain physical characteristics, actors will be able to simultaneously locate the inner values of a character. Through this process of inner discovery, an actor may also be able to discover the psychological reasons underlying the physical behavior of his or her character.

According to method acting techniques, the actor plays a large role in crafting the development of his or her character, ultimately affecting the progression of the narrative. Therefore, it is the character's development that both drives and is driven by the narrative. Consequently, the growth and development of a character are essential components in advancing the depth and complexity of the narrative.

Considering the background of narrative theory and method acting, character can also be used as a lens to explore the crafting of virtual identity. It is important to mention that a constructed online identity is not a formalized narrative; rather, my argument is that the creation of virtual identity has in common with narrative theory the crafting of character. In order to determine whether characterization exists within virtual identity, *Second Life*, an internet-based virtual world game, will be isolated as a contextual example wherein virtual-identity construction occurs.

According to narrative theory, a character can be primarily defined as being created by an author. When an individual wishes to construct a virtual identity in *Second Life*, there is a detailed process of creating an identity profile that the player must follow. For example, one of the initial steps of construction requires the player to choose either an avatar (a representation of oneself in a virtual environment which can be interpreted as an online persona or alter-ego) or an animal option, referred to as a “furry,” as their virtual identity representation. In addition, a player also has to choose a name for his or her avatar, based on a specific pre-determined list of options. This

creates a personal character profile which then allows the player to fill in information in numerous sections or tabs: “second life,” “web,” “interests,” “picks,” “classified,” “first life” and “my notes.” All *Second Life* characters have access to each other’s profile information when they are logged into the virtual world; if an avatar in *Second Life* approaches a fellow avatar, their character profiles become visible to one another. Thus, even in the initial stages of creating a *Second Life* avatar, it is apparent that a player operates as the author of his or her avatar, underlining one of the primary components of character according to narrative theory.

It is estimated that in *Second Life*, ninety-percent of the creation of an avatar or character content is user-crafted (Herman et al., 2006, p. 194). Thus, the creation of avatars has raised issues of authorship and ownership, and whether players can be considered as the potential agents of authorship. At a “State of Play” conference in November, 2003, representatives from Linden Lab, developers of *Second Life*, declared that they were prepared to recognize the value of creative contributions that game-players made to their respective virtual worlds (Herman et al., p. 185). After that announcement, all *Second Life* players were granted intellectual property rights for their creations both within the game space as well as in “real life.” According to Herman et al., “this was a radical departure for the online gaming industry, where nearly all End User License Agreements (EULA) and Terms of Service (TOS) require players to sign over their intellectual property rights in order to enter into the virtual space of the game” (Herman et al., p. 185). Therefore, by interpreting *Second Life* as a virtual space of co-created media, this type of evaluation

places emphasis on the agency of gamers and the power they wield in collaboration, through their play, their community discussions, and, more problematically, when they begin to produce their own content by actively engaging and transforming the texts their communities are centered on. (Herman et al., p. 195)

The recent recognition of the creative contributions of *Second Life* players by Linden Labs in 2003 adds credibility to the claim that avatars display character development characteristics specifically pertaining to the creative function of the author. The participatory culture that exists within the *Second Life* community highlights the concept of player authorship, an argument first advanced by researcher Cindy Poremba (Herman et al., 2006, p. 194). Poremba argues that, “Players do not use the digital game as a mediated experience but often as a medium in and of itself” (as cited in Herman et al., p. 194). Thus, when players create their own characters or avatars they become agents of their own cultural production. Players

maintain a “distributed agency” in online gaming, “a concept that foregrounds the network sociality of cultural production in digital environments and displaces the traditional idea of the individual originating author” (Herman et al., p. 194). In this way, the positions of producer and consumer, previously kept separate, are united by means of digital media.

Second Life avatars can also be interpreted as characters because they can be characterized as being fictional beings. Once an avatar has been created, the author has the option of constructing an additional history or back-story for his or her *Second Life* avatar. The character profile actually creates a distinction between the first and second life of the avatar, reinforcing the separation that exists between the real life author and his or her virtual character. Interestingly, a player has the option of writing 500 words about his or her character, but only 250 words about his or her real life identity. Thus, *Second Life* acknowledges the fact that players are creating fictional virtual identities, privileging the players’ construction of their characters over RL identities by providing additional space for character development.

While experimenting with *Second Life* for the purposes of this paper, I participated in some verbal exchanges with several other avatars online. One of these avatars, who goes by the name of Gemini Enfield, has the following description of his first life in his character profile:

Spent most of my life in the music and entertainment industry so owning a club in SL [*Second Life*] was an obvious choice (The Vortex). That’s all I’m gonna tell you – my real life is mine and for me to know. SL is my life too and I’ll talk to you about that [smile face] (Gemini Enfield, personal communication, April 3, 2007)

This quotation demonstrates how this individual, similar to many other *Second Life* players, is drawing a clear distinction between his or her real life and the virtual identity constructed online. In this way, it is clear that *Second Life* avatars can be characterized as fictional beings, separate from the RL identities that created them.

It is also important to establish whether *Second Life* virtual identities fulfill the characteristics of inner and outer character development. As previously mentioned, when a player constructs an avatar, he or she participates in a series of selections. For example, a player has the authority to choose specific physical options, such as weight and hair color. Therefore, *Second Life* players can choose an outer character that accurately reflects the

inner aspects of their character to other avatars online. For example, the *Second Life* avatar Gemini Enfield, referred to above, describes aspects of his inner character as being, “Intolerant of intolerance. Anti-Nazi, anti-racist. Very sensitive. Caring. Clean” (Gemini Enfield, personal communication, April 3, 2007). Because Enfield’s outer character is presented as a nine year old boy, it is possible that as a child, he maintains a certain level of virtual innocence that compliments his sensitive inner character. Based on this example, it is possible that *Second Life* avatars have developed inner and outer character components, contributing to the crafting of character online.

According to narrative theory, characters can also be defined as being agents and beneficiaries of an event, causing and being affected by the events occurring in a narrative. The ways that avatars are causing and being affected by events within *Second Life* have been recently and rapidly developing as the game continues to expand. Specifically, *Second Life* characters are able to create events online, such as concerts, and as a result affect other characters. For example, as a way to launch his new album, “supersunnyspeedgraphic, the lp,” solo artist Ben Folds created an avatar, entered *Second Life* and held a concert on October 19, 2006, from 7–9 pm. *Second Life* avatars were encouraged to join this event, and promised the opportunity to engage in a live chat with Ben Folds, in addition to hearing his album preview. The launch party was advertised as taking place within Aloft Hotel on Sony BMG’s Media Island in *Second Life* to commemorate the hotel’s grand opening in virtual reality. *Second Life* avatars were expected to send an email, indicating if they were going to attend the launch party, as a form of virtual RSVP. Therefore, based on this example, it is clear that *Second Life* characters can be interpreted as being both agents and beneficiaries in virtual reality.

Considering the ways that narrative theory’s character development characteristics can be applied to virtual identity, it is possible to infer that these components of character could exist solely within a fictional text. However, even though players are constructing fictional characters online, it is difficult to assume that these characters only exist within a fictional text. Here, I turn to examining the impact that online identity creation has on individual authors, and whether *Second Life* can truly be defined as a fictional text. Sherry Turkle provides a rich foundation in which I am situating my research. Although the lines between virtual reality and real life are often blurred, the construction of virtual characters enables authors to experience alternative subjectivities which can contribute to personal development. I will now examine some of the benefits and drawbacks of participating in the creation of virtual identity in order to explore these issues.

Sherry Turkle (1995) examines the relationship between identity

construction and networked technologies. By highlighting the subject of identity on the internet, Turkle uncovers complexities surrounding the construction of virtual identity. According to Turkle, MUDs situate users in a virtual world that provides them with the necessary tools to navigate and converse as a contemporary, digital type of community. Turkle explains that MUDs are actually a new form of “collaboratively written literature” in which the players are the authors, consumers and creators of their own media content (p. 11). In this regard, players are interpellated as the authors of their own texts as well as themselves, simultaneously creating new virtual selves via social interaction online.

Users can also create multiple identities online, and can navigate different identities between various MUDs. Turkle exemplifies the way that users participate in the construction of multiple virtual identities via a case study of a Midwestern college student, Doug. Doug plays four different characters online, distributed across three different MUDs: seductive woman, macho man, cowboy and a rabbit with an unspecified gender (Turkle, 1995, p. 11). Doug explains that because of the construction of his four different virtual identities, he has developed an ability to mentally transfer between them, as well as his own real life self: “I split my mind. I’m getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more. And I just turn on one part of my mind and then another when I go from window to window” (Turkle, p. 13). Doug also expresses that real life can be described as just another window that he is manipulating: “RL is just one more window ... and it’s usually not my best” (Turkle, p. 13).

Based on Doug’s case, the concept of virtual identity can be characterized as being a plural existence, consisting of two bodies: a corporeal one and a digital one. Furthermore, users do not simply have one body or identity while online. While many users solely inhabit one avatar or virtual character, some users maintain different bodies within a single space or through the use of multiple worlds. The notion of disembodiment that exists between a virtual character and an offline/RL identity is supported by recent, expanding computer technology. Frau-Meigs writes that “a true digital persona is an ‘identity’ permanently disembodied from one’s physical being” (2000, p. 231).

When users participate in various identities and relationships online, keeping track of other people’s identities and shared history may become a challenging endeavor. For example, in an online interview conducted in a MUD and published in Taylor’s article “Life in Virtual Worlds: Plural Existence, Multimodalities, and other Online Research Challenges,” the interviewee and Taylor shared a graphical space for their avatars but were

logged in at their respective computers. The interviewee's avatar name is Michael, a different name than the one he uses offline. This particular example demonstrates the plurality and multiplicity of self that is present in the construction of virtual identity. When they are engaging with others online, "users may speak as their avatar, their offline self or as both" (Taylor, 1999, p. 440). For example, during this interview Michael mentions that, "the avatar does things that the 'Real Michael' cannot do, implying that the avatar has some unique existence" (Taylor, p. 440). Because users typically slip in and out of their multiple virtual identities, users have various strategies for documenting their various exchanges in order to keep up with real-time interaction. Similarly, another interviewee also expressed the duality between controlling an avatar as well as an offline self: "Avatars have a mind of their own and they grow in unexpected ways ... You are kidding yourself if you think you will be able to control or even predict what will happen to your avatar" (Taylor, p. 440).¹

From the exchanges drawn from Taylor's study and the work of Frau-Meigs, it is evident that there is a degree of multiplicity and plurality of existence that is an intrinsic part of the virtual identity experience. The experience of constructing and manipulating various identities online is contributing to a contemporary construction of the self that can be characterized as multiple and distributed. MUDs provide users with the power to embody an identity of their choice that is either similar to, or completely different from, their self in real life. The contemporary self can be defined as decentered because it exists in multiple worlds, embodied by different roles potentially at the same time. In this regard, MUDs offer users the possibility of participating in parallel identities and parallel lives, serving as a place for the construction and reconstruction of identity.

Indeed, as people spend an increasing amount of time constructing virtual identities, the question of whether RL exists at all is becoming increasingly difficult to answer. Scholar Slavoj Žižek has explored this notion in his work, pointing to the transient nature of reality. Žižek (1991) explains that the image of reality can actually shift depending on the angle used to look at it. Consequently, Žižek believes that it is possible to have two realities: "If we look at a thing straight on, matter-of-factly, we see it 'as it really is,' while the gaze puzzled by our desires and anxieties ('looking awry') gives us a distorted, blurred image" (p. 11).

Similarly, Turkle (1995) explains that people engage in virtual role-playing as a way to experience an identity that they may not be able to successfully portray in real life:

When people can play at having different genders and different lives, it isn't surprising that for some this play has become as real as what we conventionally think of as their lives, although for them this is no longer a valid distinction. (p. 14)

This type of online role-playing can be beneficial for some individuals because it provides the opportunity to gain a new perspective on the world and their own position in it. When users adopt a new identity, they have the opportunity to experience living a life unlike their own and encountering some of the differences associated with living as another gender, race, class, or ethnicity.

MUDs also maintain a virtual world that allows for the construction of anonymous identity and social interaction. MUD participants can exercise control over elements of their self-presentation and they have the power to make conscious decisions about how they want others to perceive them (Zhao, 2005, p. 391). As Wood and Smith explain, the majority of MUD users maintain anonymity online: "In mediated contexts, anonymity is a state of communicating where the identity of the communicator is not readily apparent" (2005, p. 63). According to Turkle, in anonymous environments such as MUDs, identity can be broken into fragments, deconstructed and reconstructed: "On MUDs one's body is represented by one's own textual description, so the obese can be slender, the beautiful plain, the 'nerdy' sophisticated" (Turkle, 1995, p. 12). Users can disguise certain aspects of their identity that can be used as a catalyst for discrimination, such as gender or race. In this way, MUD users can perform a range of identity positions, hiding marginal identities and temporarily becoming part of the mainstream. Thus, anonymity online can operate as a source of empowerment, "because we cannot see each other, we cannot judge each other; consequently, virtual worlds are equalizing" (Kennedy, 2006, p. 864).

At the same time, some MUD users object to the assumption that all users are involved in "identity games" online: "one would think that most on-line interaction is anonymous and few people ever interact as themselves. The reality seems to be that many, probably most, social users of CMC [computer-mediated communication] create on-line selves consistent with their offline identities" (Baym, as cited in Kennedy, 2006, p. 864). As such, online and real life identities are connected in nuanced, complicated and varied ways.

This has implications for researchers of online identities. The trend of anonymity online is one that researchers must consider in order to effectively

evaluate and conduct interviews in online MUDs. Although some users are willing to disclose personal and contact information offline, it is crucial for researchers, particularly those conducting ethnographic interviews online, to adapt a lesser initial degree of disclosure in an online environment. However, rather than considering the issue of online anonymity strictly as a hindrance to research, the topic itself can also serve as a productive point of interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. For example, engaging in a discussion about anonymity and its relationship with online life can help the researcher initially form a common point of discussion with online users. Similarly, other questions that do not address the complexities of offline/real life identity can serve as safe introductory topics, such as how online identities exist as separate entities from offline selves.²

In conclusion, based on narrative theory's definition of character, when players construct a virtual identity online, they are also creating a character. This paper uses narrative theory as a lens to examine the construction of virtual identity, but it is only a foundation for further research, especially given my assertion that online identities and real life identities are by no means clearly distinct from each other. If character development characteristics exist within virtual identity, is it possible to consider a virtual reality, such as *Second Life*, as a narrative? If not, what other analytic frameworks besides character development would we need to explore the narrative aspects of online identities alongside considerations of real life? To test this hypothesis, further research must be conducted in this area, such as conducting a survey of *Second Life* users or engaging in ethnographic interviews online. This paper has begun this work by unraveling some of the complexities of online identities.

Notes

1. *Wired*, a magazine devoted to the digital age, has also explored the notion of fragmentation that characterizes contemporary identities, demonstrating how the multiple identities available to one's self have had an effect on consumption patterns in real life. For example, because of the availability of different characters online, there has been a recent push from advertising companies towards targeted, compartmentalized consumption. Considering the tendency towards instances of fragmented personality within contemporary society, advertising agencies are appealing to the needs of various aspects of an individual's personality. Ads and promotional culture encourage consumers to play several and often conflicting social roles at once.
2. It is also important to highlight issues of verifiability and reliability

online. Specifically, the most relevant issues surround the question, “At what level is it necessary or desirable to actually prove in some fashion the offline identity/body of a given participant” (Taylor, 1999, p. 443)? It is much easier for a researcher in an offline, face-to-face environment, to examine the intricate body language and eye contact of an interviewee in order to evaluate conclusions. However, virtual reality presents a number of unique challenges that require a researcher to adapt and change methods, such as using the medium to explore the question of embodiment via the interview. In this way, virtual reality can operate as a successful forum for researchers to interact with and thus gain information about the process of virtual identity construction.

Author

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