

Identity in Virtual Reality

Identity in virtual reality is a slippery realm of:

Mystery
Multiplicity
and
Motivation

We become otherly yet maintain a cohesiveness of self that allows for the kind of role play common to real life milieux.



Identity in Virtual Reality

1. Mystery

a. Two kinds of selfhood

From where does “selfhood” derive? Most theories of identity suppose one of two sources of self: **a core, or “essential,” self** (an idea promoted by Aristotle) **and a social, or “constructed,” self** (an idea typically promoted by contemporary sociologists and philosophers labelled “postmodernists”).

b. Core (nature) AND construction (nurture):

It’s likely that elements of selfhood take on both aspects; according to Turkle (1995) **we are conscious of a coherent, core self as we flit through our social roles** in our daily milieu. Virtual reality merely changes the boundaries that define what role play we can engage in.

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1. Mystery

c. Masks

To some, an **avatar** is a mask that obscures the “core self” and creates an opportunity to create alternative possibilities of selfhood. According to the different definitions of Meadows (2008), an **avatar**:

- “is a character in a game” (like a D&D character, Mario, The Sims or a Second Life student); (p.14)
- “is an interactive, social representation of a user” using profiles and/or pictures; “they allow you to affect, choose, or change the plot of the story”; (p.13, 15)
- “is a social creature dancing on the border between fiction and fact” (p.16);
- “a narrative device for collaborative fictions...a literary device” (p.13);
- “take different dimensions” and allow different perspectives (1D: profiles [text]; 2D: classic games [Pac Man]; 3D: 1st-person shooters [Doom]) (p.19-20)
- “is a tool for regulating intimacy” and community. (p.36)

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2. Multiplicity

a. Turkle (1995) suggests that “multiplicity” of self is, in fact, a *normal* human characteristic that we are only beginning to recognize.

Sociologists have long recognized that role-playing is a common human behavior performed when moving within and between social statuses (cf. Erving Goffman 1959). **The boundaries of successful role-play are determined by the shared agreements made within the institutional framework of belonging.**

b. In virtual reality, however, the tables are turned; the **boundaries of identity are nearly limitless** and this has created both opportunities and threats. At its core, it presents an alternate reality.

Meadows (2008) writes: “Willing and unwilling, master and slave, synthetic and natural, fiction and fact. Reality blurred at the first login.” (p.33)



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3. Motivation

- a. **CONTROL:** Meadows (2008) addresses the question of why people keep coming back to represent themselves through avatars. The “assumption of the mask” is that we assume we are under our own control when exploring multiplicity, but Meadows suggests it is more complicated (and even dangerous) than that. “When we are revealing what we want, dislike, and think, it is easier for us to be interpreted, modeled, and manipulated.” (p.37)
- b. **FLEXIBILITY:** “Second Life still seemed new to me and had a kind of draw the others didn’t because of its flexibility. I’d never seen another virtual world where there was absolutely no narrative metaphor.” (p.37)
- c. **“DISGUST (i.e. culture shock)** is reason to investigate. It usually indicates some kind of ignorance. It usually means there is something to learn. Now, I was definitely disgusted by the slave thing, but I would tell myself it was okay. I would tell myself the very thing I told you: “Oh, it’s okay, because you can be whatever gender you want to be, so there aren’t really slaves.” ” (p.37)

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3. Motivation

d. COMMUNITY: Anonymity offers a great opportunity to explore not only a new “world” in terms of virtual land, but a new inner world of psychological freedom. To explore one’s self is to reflect on who we are, as individuals and collectively, and this kind of exploration can lead to surprising discoveries and unexpectedly strong bonds.

But as the bonds grow, the anonymity is lost. Even without any “real life” information, others get to know one another well, and thus the freedom is lessened by degrees. Eventually, these alternate selves harden into a series of relatively expected and consistent ways of acting, thinking, feeling and expressing. Through shared bonding and enculturation, communities are formed.

“Most women (and men) start with a desire to be connected to a society and make a friend or two. Having someone we can trust in a new world is a common wish. After all, we all want to feel connected. One of the first things we do when we move into a new neighborhood is talk with the neighbors, exchange gifts, and learn how things are done locally. This very human, social process helps us identify our clans, groups, friends, and families—and, therefore, our identities.” (Meadows, p.39)

