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Me, my Self and my Avatar

Some microsociological reflections on "Second Life"

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Abstract

More than most other web applications, Second Life illustrates the potential of the Internet to amplify the fragmentation of human personality by inducing a manifold of "dummy identities" strictly dissociated from the piloting core personality behind the screen. In contrast to partialized offline identities as they emerge as correlates of "crossing social circles" (Georg Simmel), they transport only cues that are consciously intended and that are permanently amenable to intentional change. It is speculated that such "distributed personhood" is functional for freeing personal presence, interpersonal interactions and social memberships from the limitations of time and space, but that it has disintegrative effects which call for counteracting face-to-face interactions.

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Why live a life when one can live a dream?
(Alexander N. Kanaev 2007)

1. On human personalities in general

When human beings behave in social settings, they are usually involved as "persons". By using this term, we assume that the relationship between the acting EGO on the one hand and his external environment on the other is mediated by a third factor: a structured entity that synthesizes the more stable characteristics of the subject and that remains relatively invariant over time, changing interaction partners and various environmental conditions. By attributing actions to a "person", we are better able to assess their meanings, determine our responses or even to predict what the same actor will do next, because we relate them to a human being with a specific physical appearance, biographical history and an idiosyncratic set of character traits, attitudes, preferences, skills and motivations.

However, human activities differ drastically in the degree to which this intervening personality factor is involved.
For instance, personality considerations are fully absent in public traffic systems where interaction processes have to be modelled as a purely binary relationship between causal agent and caused empirical outcomes. Automobile drivers have simply to adapt to this causality without being able to infer anything about the drivers motives or future intentions, because no perceptions or knowledge about his or her personality is available. Among strangers meeting in public places, personality factors have still a rather low weight because they remain restricted to inferences made from visual cues: very rapid, superficial perceptions that provide information about the other's sex, age, clothing and bodily characteristics.
Within more stable and diffuse social relationships (e. g. among family members and friends), however, personality orientations are of paramount importance, because they can be based on extensive accumulated knowledge about each others idiosyncratic traits.

On an analytic level, it is crucial to notice that "persons" are constructed from what we *perceive* and from what we *know.*
Under face-to-face conditions, interactions are inevitably shaped heavily by *mutual perceptions*: by what we see, hear or even smell. When exchanging mails over distance, on the other hand, we have to rely fully on *knowledge about each other*: information acquired as a product of past interactions or provided by any third sources.
While perceptions and knowledge are highly complementary because they provide information about very different personality dimensions, they can also be substituted by each other. For instance, it is reasonable to assume that phone contacts demand more knowledge than face-to-face interactions, because on the sensory level, only acoustic cues are transmitted.

2. Human personalities online

2.1 Introduction

Seen on this background, online interactions are not different from all others. They share the characteristic that "personality" is a crucial intervening variable that helps to relate, interpret and predict actions generated by human beings. On the other hand, they add new features that have little or no equivalent in the offline world.

Evidently, online channels dramatically widen the interactional opportunities for individuals who don't want to display any information about their personality at all: e. g, by contributing anonymous messages to blogs, discussion fora etc. Secondly, many variants of highly reduced personality displays have come into existence. By registering to Amazon or another commercial website, for instance, it is sufficient to provide a minimum of information about myself. Whenever I log in, I'm activating this highly selective "personality" which is somewhat dissociated from my current "I", because it contains just the bits of invariant information I have decided to provide at some moment in the past. Of course, personality factors are more relevant when I subscribe to a partner matching platform where I have to assume a nickname and to fill out a detailed profile about my biography, my professional and leisure time activities, my musical and literary preferences etc. And thirdly, the online sphere gives rise to a multitude of virtual "dummy identities" that are highly dissociated from RealWorld personalities anchored in their physical bodies: e. g. avatar figures adopted within Multi-User Games.
While differing widely in complexity as well as in their relationship to their authoring Real-World actors, personal online identities share certain characteristics that set them sharply apart from their RealWorld counterparts. These commonalities result from the fact that they are all constituted exclusively by software code and maintained by devices of digital electronic storage and transmission.

2.2 Intentional controllability

It is typical for conventional social interactions, particularly for face-to-face contacts, that I have little control over the information I provide to others. I cannot prevent others from constructing an at least preliminary model of my personality by synthesizing all what they perceive and what they know: that I am an elderly man wearing classes, working as a university professor, having two adult children and being widowed since five years. As a consequence, my capacities for deception are also quite limited: I cannot pretend to be much younger or a member of the opposite sex.
As Erving Goffman has vividly described, all face-to-face interactions are characterized by a complex interplay between intentional utterances over which individuals have conscious control ("cues given") and unintentional expressions ("cues given off") that occur "spontaneous" or as a consequence of non-manipulable factors. (Goffman 1959: passim).
Thus, *what is said* is usually intentional (except in rare cases of spontaneous exclamations caused by fright, anger or pain), while *the way it is said* is much more permeated by uncontrollable paralinguistic factors: by individual voice idiosyncrasies as well as by cultural habits of pronunciation.
On the nonverbal level, the weight of uncontrollable factors is even much stronger. While I certainly emit intentional gestures for expressing emotions (embracements, kisses etc.) or for exerting influence (e. g. by throwing assertive gazes), most of my body movements and facial expressions are largely outside my self-perception and control. Similarly, some aspects of my personal appearance are tactically manipulated (e. g. by my choice of clothing, hairstyle and cosmetics), while others are variable only in the longer run (e. g. the length of moustaches or beards) or completely fixed by biological factors (e. my body size, gender and age).
Of course, these uncontrollable features have negative impacts insofar as they reduce the freedom of individuals to act and express themselves according to their preferences. In addition, they make interpersonal relationships unpredictable and risky because they may easily become determined by overwhelming emotions or spontaneous discriminatory or distance-taking behaviour (e. g. when a "stigma" is attributed to people with abnormal traits; Goffman 1963). On the other hand, these non-intentional aspects have positive functions insofar as they set limits to camouflage, insincerity and deception.

Therefore, primary face-to-face gatherings are most indispensable when it is essential to ascertain "authentic" feelings and opinions: e. g. in relationships of love and friendship, or in negotiating processes when the establishment of mutual confidence is a decisive factor.

By contrast, all forms of technically mediated communications have in common that intentional, controllable cues occupy a larger place, because at least some domains of uncontrollable behaviour are filtered out. Certainly, this is less true for the telephone (where many paralinguistic expressions can still be transmitted) than for text-based communication where the conveyed words and sentences appear as completely dissociated from the invisible emitting actor. On the other hand, reducing the bandwidth to text exchanges implies that individuals are freed from the need to control their gestures or bodily appearance, because all these visual aspects remain outside the communication.
Online Interactions allow even much more extensive control over the construction and selective disclosure of personality features. Excepting voice contacts, everything what is communicated has to pass the narrow gate of conscious reflection (or explicit deliberation in the case of group productions), because all elements are amenable to full intentional design.
Therefore, online identities tend to raise individual consciousness insofar as they evoke or enforce additional self-reflection. Thus, registering on a partner matching platform may imply the filling out of extensive questionnaires where I have to indicate may preferred music styles, writers or cinema stars, display my private hopes and dreams on a matching platform, or define my fields of competence as an active Wikipedia subscriber.

Seen under this perspective, the participation in virtual metaverses like "Second Life" is particularly cumbersome *because the reach of fully intentional communication has been expanded from purely verbal to nonverbal levels.* Thus, users are not only made responsible for the things they say, but also for the precise way they look and behave. While my physical body is shaped by exogenous biological factors, my avatar is completely the product of my explicit decisions. Evidently, such decisions can be difficult because I have to combine my personal preferences with tactical considerations how I want to present myself to others. Certainly, these others will see my avatar as my main medium of personal expression, because like in an anonymous urban setting, most of them will just pass by without acquiring any additional information about me.
"You can make your avatar reflect whatever aspect of your personality you want. If you've always fancied green hair, a beard or earrings, go right ahead. Your avatar (which can be changed as easily as your clothes) will probably reflect the nature of your business and the sort of people you're likely to meet." (Tebbutt 2007).

Thus, avatars will never be authentic expressions of their creators' true selves. To the contrary, they will be shaped by expectations how avatars should look like for conforming to "general norms" and for evoking widespread positive evaluations. While in RealLife, only our garments or hairstyles have to conform to norms of conventionality and fashion, such norms assume a much wider significance in SL because they also govern the shape of bodies and faces.
The higher levels of controllability are also reflected in more autonomous relationships to locations and movements. Generally, locational presence in RealLife is highly "path-dependent" (=determined by past conditions), because time is needed to travel larger distances. Thus, meeting my friend X at place A provides some minimal information about X's most recent biography: he certainly was not far away from A some moments ago. Meeting the same friend in SL provides no such information: he could have been anywhere else a very short time span ago (and be again anywhere far away shortly after). Evidently, such uncertainties can hamper the establishment of social relationships, if they are not reduced by additional (again: fully intentional) communications and commitments.
Therefore, my location in SL is at every moment attributed to me as the result of a deliberate decision that reveals my current preferences: because I'm permanently free to change

it discontinuously by flying or teleporting. For instance, when I take part in a SL classroom lecture, my presence is indicating clearly that I (still) want to participate, while my participation in a RealLife class room may be less informative because I have less options to go somewhere else.

2.3 Discontinuous creations, activations and modifications

In Real Life, changing between different mental states, interactive roles, groups, organizations or societies is usually a rather continuous process with many intermediary stages. In the very short run, we see individuals gradually waking up and becoming activated for work after lengthy procedures of body care, breakfasting etc, and see them similarly fading out their activities by becoming tired and going to sleep. And in a longer-range perspective, we see them growing up from childhood to become adolescents and adults, to become socialized into professional roles as a result of lengthy phases of education and experience, and to change physical appearance and character traits when entering stages of more advanced age. Similarly, moving from A to B cannot take place without an act of travelling: a time-span where I am somewhere "in-between"; changing an apartment goes along with a time packing when I no longer feel at home at the old place, and a time of unpacking where I not yet feel familiar at the new. And playing a role in a theatre performance means to undergo various preparatory activities that need time (e. g. for setting make ups, changing garments etc.). All such processes imply "liminality": transitory in-between phases where high subjective insecurity and anomie may be experienced because the individual is temporarily outside any defined psychological state or social situation (Turner 1969).

Many modern communication media have the effect of shortening or even eliminating such liminal stages. When I take an incoming phone call, for instance, the caller is immediately "with me", without having to approach gradually through corridors and doors; and when I log into a chatroom, I change from a state of complete exclusion to a state of complete inclusion at the very moment when the connection is established.

Online channels provide even more potent means for creating, activating and modifying personal identities without passing any intermediate "liminal" stages, and without "path dependencies" that relate present identities to the past and the future.

First of all, every online registration and every "virtual incarnation" is a free decision to create a new identity unrelated to any self-commitments and social expectations from the past. It provides a starting point for fresh courses of action and new strategies of "identity management" that are shaped exclusively by current motivations, opportunities and situational conditions. Therefore, the flight into virtual settings can be motivated by the need to escape irreversible roles and identities as they are ascribed and reinforced in dense communalistic social settings. Going into cyberspace is like migration from the native village into an anonymous city where I'm sure almost nobody I meet knows about me and my past. On the other way, it may also be like entering a "total institution" (like a an army, prison or psychiatric clinic): insofar as I have to leave my usual "civil personality" at the gate in order to adopt a much simpler "Ersatz identity" based on predefined variables provided by the virtual system. More extensive visits in such artificial simple spheres may well result in effects of unlearning and "disculturation" as Goffman has found the in longer-term psychiatric patients (Goffman 1961).

Secondly, online identities can be turned on and switched off without passing intermediary phases (e. g. by logging in and out), and they can be modified within moments by changing registering profiles, nicknames or avatar characteristics. Similarly, movements in space don't take the form of continuous travels which imply the subsequent passing of intermediary points, but the form of immediate tele-transports. so that I find myself either at A or B, but never in a definable position in-between.

In an even more dramatic way, immersion into a virtual "Metaverse" provides an experience of abrupt change without liminal phases, because reality and virtuality coexist in a

completely dissociated fashion. without any interfaces and gateways outside the digitalized software-guided access procedures.
The same dissociation exists *between* different virtual “locations”. Thus, changing from website A to website B does not imply any form of travelling in the sense of passing intermediate points. Even if there is waiting time caused by poor connection, it does not make sense to interpret this interval as a liminal state, because there is no interface between the two sites (Geser 2002). As a consequence, virtual worlds force individual to make very sudden and comprehensive role-switches that may not harmonize with the fact that their psychological moods change softly and adaptation to new attentional focuses takes time.

2.4 Dissociation from the RealLife core personality

What do I mean exactly by saying that "I'm on a homepage" or "I am in a chat room?". The main implication of such sentences is that I have divided myself into two very unequal parts: a "core personality" sitting physically in my apartment in front of the computer, and a projected "virtual me": an artificial identity defined by any specifications needed for registering, logging in, for attributing the source of my sent messages and for securing that answers are correctly sent back to my computer.
Because they exist only in the sphere of software code, personal online identities are radically dissociated from each other as well as from the core personal identity tied to the biological body and the psychological self. Given this basic decoupling, there is always a conscious act necessary for harnessing them to the authoring individual "behind" (e. g. registering and login procedures). Even in most simple cases when I log into a registered website in order to contact a support center, my interaction is mediated by an intermediate variable: the registration card through which I represent myself vis-à-vis this center. In more complicated applications where it has to be secured that a lot of different messages are attributed to the same author, I have to use more elaborate identity constructions that can be called "avatars" even when they consist only of simple customized symbols:
"....avatars are our new representation, our new incarnation in a new world online and inside the computer. They can be as simple as the pictures representing us in Microsoft Messenger, or sophisticated as a character where almost every feature is freely modifiable. You can have many. Actually, once you start using the Internet, it is almost impossible to live without one. From instant messaging services to on-line forums, the picture representing you as you would like to appear to the outside world. An expression of your identity, a state of your mind, an add-on to the picture of your second identity." (Kanaev 2007: 17)

This segregation is rather harmless in the case of completely anonymous identities, because their authors cannot be made responsible for whatever they do. Thus, very high personality involvement is achieved in Multi User Domains or massive Multi-User Games, where I have to assume a virtual personal identity which may evolve as a result of my longer-term participation: e. g. by acquiring gaming skills, climbing up artificial status ladders or initiation stages etc.
Under offline conditions, such highly involving personality commitments would be hard to tolerate because they would tie me down into tightly structured roles. In online settings, however, they are less molesting because they can be freely constructed, modified and discontinued anytime according to my own preferences.
However, severe problems can emerge when they are connected deterministically to a precise person in the RealWorld: e. g. through addresses, phone numbers or Credit card numbers which create such a determinate connection. In such cases, sophisticated technical safeguards have to be taken to guarantee that no false identity claims are occurring.
In the case of Second Life, such risks of "identity theft" emerge particularly when users are allowed to give avatars their own full name. In such cases, they would be made legally

accountable for immoral or delinquent behaviour executed in their own name: even if they have no knowledge about such "Doppelgängers".

More than other interactive online settings, Metaverses like Second Life may induce a rather deep dissociation between the invisible acting "I" in the background and the visible performing "me" on the screen. In SL, this is happening particularly in the case when I choose the default "observer" mode where I can see my own avatar acting. This implies that I take a decentered, objectivized stance toward my avatar: not unlike the observing position I take to all others. By observing myself, I can take a self-reflective, critical attitude toward my nonverbal performances and their effects on others. In RealLife, this decentered attitude is more restricted to verbal utterances (because I can hear them in a similar way I see others talking), while the visible cues I emit are usually hidden from me: especially my facial expressions which I could only observe by looking into a mirror.
In SL, the capacities for self-observation are extended to the visible sphere, so that all the emitted cues are subject to self-perception, self-evaluation and self-control. Another implication of the observer mode is that I'm able to see my environment from (almost) the same perspective as all the others, especially when I observe my own avatar from a larger distance. It may be hypothesized that such convergences may foster social integration. For instance, the feeling to belong to the same group may be catalyzed by seeing this group clearly from proper distance (as an aggregation of avatars) and by seeing oneself as just a group member like all the others.

Given the full freedom to choose and shape one's own avatar, SL offers excellent conditions to experiment with alternative personal identities. However, there is evidence that in most cases, such experimentations take place only in at the beginning, while in the longer run, users find it too cumbersome (or uninteresting) to develop and maintain an identity that is radically different from that in Real Life. Thus, de Nood and Attema have found in their survey that out of 242 SL participants, more than 90% have never engaged in gender swapping. In particular, almost no females have ever faked to be a male (de Nood/Attema 2006: 19).
Particularly in the case of reputable individuals of higher status, there is a strong inclination to shape an avatar that is resembling the physical person in stature, clothing and behavior. When former Virginia governor Mark Warner stepped into Second Life as the first US politician (in August 2006), the clothes of his avatar *"could have come from the Governor's own closet - blue blazer, white shirt, red power tie, khaki slacks" (Scola 2006).*
We may even assume that many participants see better possibilities to be "themselves" in SL than in RL, because they are freer to play out their personal preferences without being constrained by established roles and behavioral expectations (de Nood/Attema 2006: 20). However, there is a strong tendency toward idealization: avatars a constructed to conform to the "ideal self" of its creators. Thus, most of them are nicely dressed and about 20 years old (Kirkpatrick 2007), even extremely obese Americans tend to adopt slim figures, and almost everybody seems to follow the newest fashionable trends.
„Although some people create avatars that look and act like their real selves, many people use the chance to be what they always wanted to be or at least want to try for awhile. The average height of avatars in Second Life is 7 feet tall. Everyone seems thinner, and usually more attractive." (Abelson 2006).

From a sociological perspective, it is fascinating to notice that virtual gatherings have the capacity to combine functionalities of informal primary groups and highly formalized forms of communication. In terms of Erving Goffman (1959), they are similar to face-to-face meetings in the sense that they can combine focused and unfocused social interaction. In telephone conferences as well as in IRC's and Email exchanges, social interactions are completely reduced to focussed interaction centering on the explicit formal issues, while in SL, such exchanges are embedded in a wider setting that encompasses also

- preceding stages where members notice and greet each other, engage in small talk, jokings and personal exchanges;
- subsequent phases where participants may continue talking in smaller groups and on more informal levels.

As we all know from common wisdom, such casual informal exchanges are not irrelevant, but may be critical in establishing interpersonal bonds and multilateral networks that can be important resources in the future (Kirckpatrick 2007).
While certainly not substituting the flavour of Real Life meetings, there is much evidence such "virtual encounters" are found substantially rewarding by all participants, because they are taking place in the frame of a situated social environment: so that they have much more similarity to face-to-face contacts than simple chats or Email exchanges.
"Blogs and chat rooms lack the physicality, immediacy, and nuance of Second Life. Using those tools, you can't whisper to your neighbour, show loyalty (or pique) by hunkering down in one part of the room or another. Second Life's combination of real-time interaction and physical embodiment create a space unlike anything else online." (Scola 2006)

On the other hand, virtual gatherings can be substitute for highly formalized communicative exchanges because they are much more consistent with high "functional specificity" (in terms of Talcott Parsons 1950: 68ff.) than primary forms of interactions. When people meet physically at a place, they have no choice than to bring their entire body and their whole personality to the occasion. As a consequence, they have many channels they can use for personal expression. For instance, they can enhance their visual appearance with perfume fragrances or enrich their talk with paralinguistic cues and various forms of non-verbal gesture behaviour. Thus, even most serious discussions about business matters, scientific truths or war and peace may easily become "polluted" by more diffuse factors: because interacting partners get hungry and thirsty, sneeze and cough as a consequence of cold weather, or cannot help to fall into private small talk or to develop uncontrollable reactions or personal sympathy or antipathy vis-à-vis each other.
In virtual worlds like Second Life, communication is "delegated" to avatars that represent only a small, highly simplified part of the human personalities behind. Avatars display their "personality" more exclusively by their visual appearance: their bodily characteristics as well as their clothing and accessories, Therefore, their appearance and traits are very crucial because they will usually remain constant during the interaction and - as no other information is available - they will heavily predetermine the roles to be played and the impacts made on other actors.
For this reason, much of the SL economy centers on "fashionable clothing shops", and there is much demand for services of professional "virtual fashionists" who consult newcomers (or participants eager to visit highly exclusive gatherings and events).
As personal idiosyncrasies associated with particular human bodies and characters are missing, virtual interaction can more uncompromisingly be shaped by conventional standards generated and implemented by specific social institutions: e. g. by policemen, soldiers and clergymen carrying uniforms, or by dancers and rappers reproducing precisely the currently fashionable styles of clothing, hair-dressing and behaviour.

According to the SIDE theory, online interaction is apt to reinforce the salience of objective social status aspects because such aspects become more prominent to the degree that more personalized, idiosyncratic aspects of the interacting individuals are not transmitted (Spears/Lea 1994). For instance, my communication with an online female partner may be obsessively shaped by the knowledge that she is a woman, while my face-to-face interactions with the same person may be less "sexist" because attention is more directed to other salient personality traits not related to gender. It can be hypothesized that the use of avatars may even amplify the power of social cues, insofar as such social identities are not only known in an abstract way, but they can be constantly seen in the shape given to the virtual puppet. Thus, relationships between males and females, teachers and pupils, supervisors and subordinates may be played out in very pure form when the status differen-

tials are manifested in different size, clothing or behaviour of the corresponding avatars. In particular, we may observe that many avatars have no personal profile and social life apart from the basic fact that they are representatives of a particular group, organization or institution. For instance, a business meeting may easily be nothing but a business meeting because the participants convey a corresponding appearance and behaviour - and nothing else.
Given the extreme importance of avatar shapes as a determinant of social expectation and social behaviour, it is not astonishing that this appearance is a major determinant of group membership and social cleavages in SL:
"Social groups within SL are often differentiated by customized appearances, ranging from Goths and vampires to those who adopt animal-like avatars (hamsters are particularly popular). As another example, numerous social events are cantered around adopting certain appearances, such as country western dances, "best dressed" and even "sexiest avatar" competitions." (Hayes 2006: 157).

Unquestionably, the imminent transition to voice communication (planned for Sept. 2007) is likely to diminish this specificity, because the channel bandwidth is increased so that a manifold of paralinguistic signals (e. g. emotions expressed in voice tone) are included. As a consequence, there will be less opportunity for pretending a false identity (e. g. because status characteristics like gender, age, linguistic background will can no longer be hidden), and even more than in phone contacts, feelings of familiarity will be engendered that collide with strict anonymity standards. There will be a stronger connection between the avatar and the Real Person behind: eliminating the option that robots are used or that the same avatar (e. g. acting as a business representative) is piloted by different actors.

2.5 "Distributed personhood"

The physical body is playing a major part in securing the integrity of individuals when they engage in highly divergent behaviour and social roles. As a stable, indivisible object that can easily be perceived by everybody in proximity, it offers a reliable anchor for attributing actions and for biographical accounts.
It could be hypothesized that with increasing diversification of social memberships and roles, there is a rising need for referring to the human body as a compensating integrative element. Therefore, face-to-face interactions may become increasingly important for individuals in order to feel that they are unities (and perceived by others as such unities) despite the highly partialized subidentities they project when participating in specialized groupings and when playing specific roles. Without primary interactions, individuals may easily transform into "dividuals" that would become segmented into rather unrelated partialized selves.
Online interactions entail exactly this danger because they facilitate the division into segmented personalities, each of which can be acted out on specialized channels, without being anchored in a permeating physical substrate. Certainly, there "is" a single actor behind all these specialized performances, but its unity doesn't become visible to anybody outside himself, so that each actor has to maintain the cohesion of his personality by his own efforts, because this unity is no longer socially reinforced.
"It is not illegal to have a hundred different email addresses, being registered in discussion groups under different names, or to quickly create a new dummy self to troll in the forums. An anecdotic situation, where a person posts his/her work online and then creates hundreds of dummy characters only to write superb reviews of their own work are becoming an increasing concern. Nicknames, once a part of the cultural folklore, are now a new form of self-expression, but also a new form of anonymity in a world where stories about "identity theft" are symptoms of an alarming trend – as we rely on it more and more, dependency on virtual identities is growing faster than anyone thought possible." (Kanaev 2007: 12).

In his seminal work on the "crossing of social circles", the German sociologist Georg Simmel concludes that modern societies are characterized by a specific form of labour division that catalyzes individualization. In premodern societies, role differentiation was mainly engendering *inter*individual divisions by placing each individual completely into a grid of specific status positions and roles. Thus, feudal societies were fragmented into tightly integrated collectivities of nobles, priests, monks, peasants and artisans of different trades that maintained different collective identities and specific cultural and behavioral traditions.

In modern societies, by contrast, role differentiation tends to catalyze *intra*individual cleavages because each individual participates in several highly independent societal groupings and institutions (e. g. work, family, politics, leisure, medicine, sports etc.) that may impose highly divergent or even contradictory norms, values and behavioral expectations. As each individual has his own way of combining different roles and switching between them, he or she becomes automatically different from all others: living his or her particular biography and developing idiosyncratic character traits and points of view. (Simmel 1908: 305ff.).

However, segregation between individuals goes along with a decline in overall personal consistency and integration: individuals become internally fragmented by conflicting values and norms: experiencing "cross pressures" (S. M. Lipset 1960) that hinder them to engage in unconditional commitments and to make consistent and predictable decisions (e. g. in political votings).

In the RealWorld, the accumulation and acting out of different roles is of course constrained by various physical factors: especially by the inability to be in different locations at the same moment or within short spans of time. While vibrant urban environments provide certainly much better opportunities in this respect than bleak rural regions, modern communication technologies have fundamentally reduced or even eliminated the salience of such locational factors by providing much extended opportunities for role switching at any time and any location on earth.

Look at typical Internet surfers or mobile smart phone users how they use these technologies for changing rapidly between highly divergent roles: adopting the receptive mode of news gatherers or music listeners, ordering a ticket or a book from Amazon, looking around for potential spouses on a partner matching site, coordinating meetings with collaborators, keeping in touch with the girl-friend by empathic "grooming calls", engaging in lively chats or blog discussions, subscribing to a new gaming community, updating the personal website etc. At least the more *interactiv*e online activities fulfil Simmels premise that they force individuals to segment their personality by adopting a specified social role, and by displaying a strategically tailored identity that may differ from the faces showed in other social engagements.

In their early studies on IRC's and Multi-user Domains,, Sherry Turkle and Elisabeth Reid have emphasized how online communication can facilitate the articulation of multiple and changing representation of the self, and that the salience of virtual personae may become so pronounced that differences between the real and the artificial life spheres become blurred. (Turkle 1995; 1999; Reid 1991).By trying out alternative roles and personalities widely apart from RealLife-identity, individuals may enlarge their social experience and discover new, hitherto neglected aspects and developmental capacities of their own self (Turkle 1999: 643).

In this sense, we may say that the electronic media are carrying on a process of intraindividual fragmentation that has earlier been initiated in urban styles of life: aiming a state when "personality" is no longer concentrated on the physical individuals located at a single place, but distributed among many contexts where the individual is partially present with his voice, his writing or - like in SL - his avatar (Dvorsky 2007).

SL seems to be a particularly potent "personality fragmentizer" because by creating an avatar, the individual gives rise to a visible and stable representative of himself that easily becomes an "attractor" for many new social norms and expectations which have no connection to any other roles played out either in other online settings or in RealLife.

Investing part of my personality in an avatar means: committing it to a figure that afterwards changes myself because he lives a life of its own: gets integrated into various social networks or groupings, assumes a status in a virtual stratification system (in the case of SL: heavily based on real estate property), and has to fulfil many norms and role obligations emerging out of informal social relationships and formal membership involvements. (Dvorsky 2007).

While role performances may be rather dissociated from the personality behind (especially in cases of pronounced "role distance"), we know from many studies that they can nevertheless feed back on the actor by modifying his cognitive perspectives as well as his normative commitments and his behavioral motivations and goals.
"In almost every MMOG, the selection of the avatar is not a process to be taken lightly. Rather, it is almost an initiation, a rite-de-passage. Gender and height, race or breed, hair style and name – depending on the world you are about to enter, those can be either changed later, or will be you for the years that you play with this character. The character you create in an MMORPG – it is you as thousands of people will meet you. It is you as you want to appear, it is the way you want to be known, it is the foundation of your brand new identity." (Kanaev 2007: 18).

Thus, the question arises whether - and to what degree - the avatar can in turn become a source of personal experience, learning, and resocialization. For instance, individuals may well develop the need to perform similar things in RL as their avatar can do within "Second Life".
"People often tell me that they're affected by the avatar in a very powerful way. It is so easy to externalize your intent in the form of the avatar that it does inevitably make you more demanding on the physical world. People come back to reality and they say, 'Wait a minute. I need to be able to do the same things here. I think, therefore I should be able to be that thing that I think.'"[1].

While many will turn to virtual worlds for diversifying their personal identities, others may use them for amplifying their single core personality by extending the time and reach of their personal presence. Politicians, Pop Stars and many other people of high public reputation are pressured to be on several locations simultaneously, or on very different locations within very short time. Evidently, such role expectations collide with the hard physical restrictions of the Real World: e. g. with the impossibility of "being in public" while staying at home, or with the travel time needed to move from location A to a distant location B.
The Internet provides many technical tools for diminishing or even eliminating such role incompatibilities. For instance, politicians are able to "be present" on blogs, in newsgroups or in virtual chat rooms irrespective of their geographical location. Metaverses like Second Life have definitely extended such possibilities: by providing tools for maintaining a "virtual presence" at a concrete virtual place with an avatar: a highly customized simulacrum of oneself.

3. On the future of avatars

It is evident that today's avatars represent a rather early stage in a longer-term evolution, because so many potentials of virtual "dummy personalities" have not yet been discovered and exploited. Two developments seem particularly likely to be realized within the near or middle-range future.

1) Avatars as transparent beings

[1] Words of the SL founder Philipp Rosedale, cited in Colligan 2006).

2) Avatars as intelligent agents?
2) Avatars as transparent beings?
While the high control over the cues emitted can be used to preserve anonymity, it can also be used for very high degrees of disclosure that surpass anything that is possible in RealLife (even among intimate partners and close friends).
Thus, we may see the rise of "transparent avatars" who can get insight into each other's character traits, personal values, sexual preferences and political opinions by just approaching each other. Such hyper-disclosures may well be functional for lonely people to find partners who share their lifestyle and attitudes.
Of course, the emphasis given to different aspects can easily be manipulated. Some people may be interested to advertise their preferred novel writers, movies or music bands, whole others may stress their philosophical "Weltanschauung" or religious confessions. Future avatars may become able to vary their degree and mode of transparency in accordance with their varying roles, activities and environmental conditions. For instance, specific gender-related aspects may shine up when male avatars are approaching women, while lists of skills and experiences may overshadow everything else when somebody is advertizing himself as a freelancer or applying for a job.
Personal hypertransparency could be used for facilitating the selection of adequate partners within crowds in public places, and for accelerating the disclosure processes necessary for more intimate social bonds. As the well known "Social Information Processing" (SIP) theory predicts, purely text-based online relationships need more developmental time than offline encounters, because a thinner flow of cues is transmitted (Walther 1992;1996). Multimedia inter-avatar relationships, however, may to the contrary become established in much shorter time, because intimate personal and biographic knowledge is available from the start.

2) Avatars as intelligent agents?
Momentarily, typical avatars are just passive masks or puppets that are completely controlled by their creators, without having an identity and a life of their own. However, the way is very open for the evolution of agent-avatars who have at least some capacity to act according to their own decisions, or even to use such autonomous behaviour for acquiring knowledge and skills. This development is likely to be heavily stimulated by corporate actors who don't like to leave their SL information desks unmanned whenever their collaborators go home for sleep or the weekend. They will be eager to develop artificial representatives who operate on a 24/7/365 basis without becoming tired and without lamenting for shorter hours and higher wages.
We may well see the emergence of hybrid avatars who change between a "personal mode" (when its creator is present) and a reduced "bot mode" (when he is momentarily absent). Some individuals or firms may well cultivate a whole "zoo" of semi-autonomous avatars who serve to extend their presence through time and space as well as to amplify their action capacities by accumulating additional information, knowledge and skills.

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