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Body Language: Avatars, Identity Formation, and Communicative Interaction in VRChat

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"avatar - the incarnation of one kind of individual into another kind, as in a god's becoming a man"

- Charles Winick, *Dictionary of Anthropology*

"In VRChat there are many avatars to choose from to change your appearance. These range from humans, robots, aliens and more."

- VRChat, "Basic Tutorials: Avatar Menu"

The term "avatar" has a long history of use to describe an alternate embodiment, usually referring to a form different from one's "original" embodiment. Its origins lie in the Sanskrit word meaning "descent," used to describe the form a god takes when descending to earth. In Hinduism, avatars are the various material incarnations of gods required to enter the lower, human realm. The use of the term to describe the virtual representation of self in digital environments finds its origins in the realm of science fiction and computer gaming. Its earliest use in this context is the 1979 PLATO role-playing game entitled *Avatar*, but perhaps its most memorable early use is within Lucasfilm's role-playing game *Habitat* created in 1986 (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 23). *Habitat*, in turn, inspired Neal Stephenson's usage of "avatar" in *Snow Crash*, a science fiction novel that described the forms taken by humans entering a virtual world, along with his creation of the term "metaverse" to describe multiple levels of human interaction in various worlds or "verses."

The use of an avatar in the digital world – a digital surrogate for the physical self in a communicative interaction, or the form a human takes when entering a virtual world – is a requirement when one digitally engages with others. VRChat is one such platform of virtual worlds where avatars are required. In VRChat, avatars serve as vehicles that enable users to enter the platform, move throughout a variety of virtual worlds and activities, and socialize with others who also rely on a virtual form to interact and communicate. This platform, accessible through the VRChat website (vrchat.com) and the game client service Steam, offers to current and potential users the ability to "Create and Play in Virtual Worlds." Accompanying this claim are bite-sized claims announcing VRChat as a distinct place to "Make Friends," "Create Worlds," and design and use "Custom Avatars," encouraging people to "Join the Community" by

accessing VRChat itself and engaging in conversation about the platform on social media accounts. These accounts include an official YouTube where interactions and explorations of groups of avatars are showcased, as well as a Discord channel, a space often used for chatting between "gamers." In the Community FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), administrators answer the question of "How do I change my avatar?" by explaining that the system "[has] a wide variety of public avatars to use. Open the Quick Menu and click avatars to find the perfect look — or roam the virtual realms in search of the perfect avatar for you" (VRChat 2020). In this way, VRChat presents itself as environment with the ability to fill one's desires for self-identification and collective interaction with other persons seeking the same fulfillment.

What motivates people to enter this virtual space? The platform's website markets VRChat as a place of exploration and creativity, showcasing fun interactions involving interesting avatars. These images appeal to people who have engaged in other online social platforms, like Second Life or Club Penguin, and are familiar with using avatars in virtual communication with others. Additionally, this marketing appeals to people interested in avatar design and implementation, particularly alongside the robust VRChat documentation and support available for people who want to create avatars and worlds in virtual space. Users may access the platform either through a link on the VRChat website or through Steam, an application from which account-holders may access video games and virtual experiences. The presence of the platform and ability to access it through a gaming client encourages "gamers" to enter VRChat.

I initially heard about VRChat from friends who had experienced the platform's environments, and saw images of VRChat from screenshots, video recordings, and memes created by a multitude of users on the meme-sharing and social networking websites YouTube, iFunny, and 9GAG. This environment particularly intrigued me because of the variety of avatars

available to players and how those players appeared to use them. What was the significance of this platform that perpetuated its own unique characters and interactions long after the persons involved in their production and reproduction logged off the system? I was curious about how avatars were created, perpetuated through interaction, and preserved on other digital platforms, as well as how persons gained meaning through entering the platform and taking on such differing virtual forms.

In his ethnography *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Boellstorff makes the claim that "the virtual is the anthropological" (Boellstorff 2008, 237). He defines virtual worlds as "places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet," specifying technologically-induced virtual worlds within his study of Second Life (Boellstorff 2008, 6). This definition coincides with the many available locations within the VRChat platform. Additionally, Boellstorff claims that "ethnography has a special role to play in studying virtual worlds because it has *anticipated* them," drawing upon ideas posited by his anthropological forefathers like Geertz (Boellstorff 2008, 6). Although other disciplines have valid methodological means of studying virtual worlds, anthropology as a discipline is very well-suited to study the virtual.

Researching Virtual Worlds and Avatars

Anthropological writings are fictions in the sense that "they are something made, something fashioned, the original meeting of *fictio* - not that they are false, unfactual, or merely "as if" thought experiments" (Geertz 1973). During the past 30 years, anthropologists have written fictions detailing their experiences within virtual worlds via methods of participant observation and platform analysis, methods that have been used to understand "real" world communities of persons and spaces since early in the discipline's history. Other fields of study

have also sought to address virtual worlds, including games studies, communication, psychology, and philosophy. These disciplines approach the study of virtual worlds in very different ways. As a double major in anthropology and communication and digital studies, and through the culmination of my coursework and open discussion in my courses, I offer this generalized overview of these varied disciplinary approaches. In games studies, research is typically divided into two groups – theory, including ludology and narratology, and practice, via studies of technology and the game design industry. With regards to the communications and digital studies fields, virtual worlds are considered as places for digital identity formation, including virtual platforms like social media. In the psychology field, focus on the virtual is founded in personal identity, with VR experiences focusing on persona and "out of body experiences" that may be explained through "hard science" means. Philosophy further investigates the concept of "worlds" through ontological thought and the definition of "self." However, in the field of anthropology, practitioners place an emphasis on social relationships and persons, particularly through research methods like participant observation and ethical practices that serve the best interests of informants, making this theoretical approach distinctive. I acknowledge that extensive literature about virtual worlds and their study exists in all of these fields of study. However, this is beyond the scope of this paper and diverts attention from my current project's purpose of the anthropological study of avatars in VRChat.

<u>Central Arguments</u>

Communication, including using one's body as part of non-verbal communicative acts and language, forms the foundation of social interactions between persons, whether in "real" or "virtual" spaces. I argue that the ways in which virtual bodies appear and move through space

directly draw upon, and also influence, "real" embodiment, as persons use virtual avatar forms that are surrogates for their "real" forms in their communication with other avatar-users. "Real" embodiment in virtual worlds relies on virtual avatar forms which are controlled and performed by "real" human interactors. I argue that, in virtual worlds, one's selection of avatar forms allows for alternate methods of self-expression and communication that directly tie into one's "real" sense of self as they act on their preferences of appearance and desires of expression. In the case of "self" experimentation, any communicative act and sense of identity impacts one's holistic personage. Such an ability to experiment with avatars – taking a different form as one's own outward appearance to others – enables persons to take on characteristics not usually found or available to any specific person in "real" life. I argue that this ability influences "real" embodiment by encouraging persons to further consider the process of embodiment and how humans interact and communicate with one another. As a researcher and participant in avatar embodiment in the virtual worlds of VRChat, I contend that avatars create new possibilities for how persons represent their essential selves, yet also constitute segments of one's identity – a person is the sum of their culture, upbringing, interactions with others, and choices of embodiment as the digital provides an opportunity of posthuman escape from the limits of mere physical "real" embodiment.

In my process of scholarly research, participant observation, and data analysis, I sought to answer several questions relating to avatars, as my study in VRChat increasingly focused around their adoption and how they were utilized in various forms and opportunities of interaction. Primarily, I wanted to observe and develop interpretations of the relationships between persons and their avatars and how those relationships impacted communication with other persons on the VRChat server. Secondarily, I hoped to learn about the meanings that persons attach to avatars in

VRChat by observing and experiencing the platform alongside the persons making those interpretations of avatars. This paper reflects the state of the VRChat platform during the fall of 2019, from August to November of that year.

<u>Methodology</u>

In order to learn about avatars as forms of digital embodiment and study the use of avatars in virtual worlds, I accessed the VRChat platform and took the form of an avatar myself. This approach to fieldwork enabled me to learn and study on a more personal level, granting me an experience distinctive to the field of anthropology. The fieldwork that I conducted within VRChat enabled me to understand the embodiment process, avatar selection, and social interaction specific to this platform as I engaged with other people within the hundreds of different virtual worlds available, ranging from hyper-realistic to cartoonish in appearance and function. Accessing the platform and engaging in acts of avatar embodiment gave me the chance to both observe and participate, collecting qualitative data about my fellow interactors and surroundings in an ethical and intuitive way.

I began my research by taking what I already knew about VR technology and putting it to work – I made sure that I had the proper equipment to interact with and within the platform by confirming the availability of the VR system with the director of the University of Mary Washington's Speaking Center and asked his permission to use the equipment during off-hours. In order to access VRChat, I used an Oculus Rift virtual reality system with VR goggles, controllers, and two stationary sensors, a custom-built Falcon personal computer with NVIDIA graphics cards and drivers built for use in UMW's teaching technology department, and my personal account on Steam, a game-centric client and hub for accessing the VRChat experience.

As someone with experience in interacting with virtual environments and playing VR-enabled games, and who had set up the Oculus Rift system myself for Speaking Center use, I was comfortable adjusting the system's sensors to accommodate my height and distance from the associated PC equipment, using and manipulating the Oculus Touch motion-sensing controllers in order to perform different button presses and hand motions, and spending hour-long periods of time in virtual reality.

I approached fieldwork with a "diving headfirst" attitude, entering into the virtual worlds of VRChat without conducting extensive background research beforehand. I spent about an hour familiarizing myself with the VRChat-specific controls that aligned with specific buttons on the Touch controllers, how to move my character through virtual spaces, and the different menus available to me as an interactor that displayed settings, avatar selection (including "Favorited" avatars), a Social tab with the list of Friends and persons in the room, and a grid-like selection panel of avatar emotes available to VR users. Much of my time in the field was spent in areas which one enters when first joining VRChat interactions, including starter worlds – popular hangouts accessible through the main system of worlds portals, represented by a blue room with glowing entranceways to other locations – and in rooms with avatars on manikin-type display for experimentation. These spaces often contained other actors who were just starting out alongside more experienced interactors that assisted those around them with avatar changing, system troubleshooting, discussion of technology, and ability to see others' avatars, all fueled by a spirit of excitement. By entering VRChat, I was witness to and participant in environments of varied interactions full of generally-shared levels of enthusiasm for interaction with others and curiosity about the innerworkings of the virtual platform.

Traditional methods of note-writing in a field journal, voice recording with an audio recorder, and a formally-structured format of interviewing and focus groups were unavailable to me as I interacted within worlds that required absolute attention through my "real"-world-blocking goggles and headphones. I utilized the Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) system of audio/video recording, commonly used by gamers and live streamers, to record my full "goggles-eye" experience, enabling me to access my fieldwork later. I also journaled in a personal notebook after each hour-long fieldwork session, taking notes and writing about my immediate impressions and personal feelings about my experiences as close to my exit from the virtual worlds as possible. In total, I spent about 7 hours in VRChat and over 30 hours journaling about my experiences, re-watching my screen captures of the Oculus Mirror, and transcribing sections of conversation between persons.

Participant observation was vital to my study because I needed to embody an avatar form myself in order to fully understand how other persons did the same. By actively engaging with other persons in the VRChat platform, I gained "on the ground" knowledge of the virtual terrain of VRChat and how persons communicate with one another using their active embodiments of virtual avatar forms. Such methods of ethnographic research were enabled through my training as a student of anthropology.

As I conducted fieldwork, I made sure to maintain the user privacy of persons that I encountered, censoring screen names on screen shots from my avatar's point of view and using pseudonyms for actors within transcription and vignettes in order to fully protect interactors on the VRChat platform. Additionally, I refrain from speculating about the "real world" genders of interactors that I encountered based on their vocal characteristics, like pitch, as I composed my vignettes, despite some interactors making assumptions about other persons in this way.

In VRChat, it was difficult to display an outward-facing identity as an anthropologist, as compared to other virtual worlds like Second Life where one may write a public profile (Boellstorff 2008, 70). In order to be respectful to other interactors on the platform, I chose avatars that appeared approachable as an attempt to encourage others to interact with me, along with avatars that made me feel comfortable enough to go with the virtual flow and engage in various communicative behaviors. I adhered to community guidelines, including practicing tolerance and refraining from impersonating others or discriminating against them, creating sexual content, manipulating the VRChat client server, stealing content, soliciting or selling products, or using "role-playing" as an excuse for violating guidelines, and discouraged others that did not adhere these rules to follow suit without alienating potential informants. Friction did occur between my "real" and "virtual" worlds, particularly as my fieldwork was constrained to times that I was able to access the VR technology (usually in the evenings and over the weekend when the Speaking Center was closed) as well as limits imposed by my human body. I limited my virtual sessions in the field to about an hour each as a way to try and prevent VR sickness – dizziness, nausea, and disorientation caused by gaps between human perception and the virtual environment's ability to generate immersive realms. My fieldwork also suffered from additional technological glitches that interrupted my fieldwork and cut my time short as I witnessed interactions that caused the servers of particular virtual worlds to crash. As an "Early Access" platform of user-created virtual worlds, technically, a "game" still in development, VRChat is always in flux, with new additions and technological problems that are constantly being repaired, updated, and improved upon. I acknowledge that all of these present potential weaknesses in my research methodology, but I did my best to address these factors and capture an accurate and detailed view of how avatars were used on the VRChat platform at the time of my fieldwork.

Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life* informed my study of "Early Access" VRChat, just as Margaret Mead's study of adolescence and transition in *Coming of Age in Samoa* inspired Boellstorff's exploration of the Second Life platform during its formational years. This ethnography, widely cited in other studies of virtual worlds, describes culture in Second Life as "an interplay between forms of selfhood and community on the one hand, and place and time on the other, all meeting under the rubric of intimacy," encouraging me to similarly explore the VRChat platform (Boellstorff 2008 178). I also read about other anthropological studies of virtual worlds, including Bonnie Nardi's fieldwork in *World of Warcraft* and TL Taylor's work regarding embodiment, avatars, and gender after she conducted fieldwork in the game *EverQuest*. These were useful in my analysis since all ethnographic study in virtual worlds required the use of avatars, and every author of virtual world research addressed their methodology alongside the implications of avatar use. Additionally, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* by Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor helped guide my virtual research as I formulated my methodology and maintained ethical research guidelines. In particular, I made sure to learn the basics of "everyday life" on the platform through learning controls and avatar-swapping, take screenshots and flesh out vignettes after fieldwork sessions, use items and environments as conversation pieces, take the lead of my informants in interactions, and operate from a principle of care (Boellstorff et al. 2012 73, 83, 96, 118, 135).

Findings

The following sections detail my fieldwork through composed vignettes of selected moments of interest. I pair these short stories with arguments drawn from my research and scholarly backing to support my resulting claims. Ultimately, I seek to address different aspects

of identity formation via virtual avatars and communicative interaction between the persons who inhabit and control them within the VRChat platform of virtual worlds. Within these sections, I delve into posthumanism, feminism, and ontological thought as I connect my experiences and interpretations to scholarly perspectives.

Avatars and Identity

Communication between persons in the digital realm requires a digital identity of some kind, a way for others on the platform to identify one person from another. In VRChat, the main way that persons may be identified is through their screen name, which, by default, appears in a box floating above the head of that actor's avatar. This name also appears in one's personal menu screen while within VRChat. Tabs in this menu include the "Social" window where one may view friends – each person's icon includes their screen name underneath an image of the avatar from which they took their last form. This avatar, and all avatar forms chosen, serves as a bridge between the "real" and the "virtual" – a liaison that, with the help of physical and code-based technology, transfers a person's consciousness from the "real" world into the "virtual" one. This use of an avatar is a requirement when one engages with a virtual world as oneself and others conceptualize each other's presence on the platform.

Based on my research, persons seem to have many different understandings and feelings about their avatar choices, especially due to the wide variety of avatars from which one can choose. Avatars designs are numerous, ranging from generic human forms created by the design team upon the platform's launch, to genderless robots and polka-dotted mushrooms, to highly-exaggerated male and female forms wearing revealing clothing. Characters from media like

television shows, movies, and video games are also available as avatars in both true-to-source-material and manipulated versions ranging from different clothing to character combinations.

During my fieldwork and when I watched videos of previously-recorded VRChat interactions by other interactors, I saw many different kinds of avatars with different emoting capabilities, design, and ability to interact with other avatars. An "emote," short for "emotion" and reminiscent of established ways of displaying emotions in a Western cultural context, enables a person to manipulate an avatar in a way prescribed by that avatar's internal code. Avatars created by the platform's creators have a static, limited set of emoting capabilities named Wave, Clap, Point, Cheer, Dance, Backflip, Sadness, and Die. These emotes are accessible through the Emote tab on a menu activated by a person pressing buttons on their controller of choice. Alternately, avatars created by persons who interact on the platform have a variety of capabilities that differ from the developers' pre-packaged avatars. Some of these emotes are imported from other programs, including everything from special dances accompanied by music and voice lines specific to an avatar model to special props and animations impacting the environment surrounding an avatar. No matter their origins, all user-developed emotes involve formatting using the VRChat avatar creation system, a software development kit (SDK) that requires Unity, a cross-platform game engine developed by Unity Technologies. The use of the Unity system partially determines the structure and potential capabilities of new avatars, a necessary restriction as users import their creations into the communal VRChat platform which must support them all. Additionally, when a user accesses the assets available on the creation interface, some are free while others cost money, allowing for user creativity but potentially creating restrictions for those behind a pay wall. These characters vary widely in graphics quality, extremeness of emote length and movements, and inclusion of

character-specific theme music and voice lines, depending on how much effort and money went into each avatar's respective creation. All of these attributes are important because they determine how persons are able to communicate with one another using such technologically-bounded avatars.

The virtual reality technology and supporting systems that enable virtual interaction also unintentionally limit its potential to connect persons from different backgrounds and of different identities. Knowledge about and ability to use this technology is crucial for one to act as a creative agent within this digital space. In order to create an avatar, a person must have Unity installed on a computing device that can handle the program, along with some rudimentary knowledge of how to use the system. However, the VRChat website includes a large how-to guide for creators that can help them in creating avatars and virtual worlds, helping mitigate some of the potential barriers to user participation in the platform. This guide comes complete with everything from helpful step-by-step instructions to open-source software available for all to use in their avatar creation capacities. This allows the inner workings and structure of the platform to remain consistent and running smoothly for the VRChat team of system moderators while also enabling persons of all coding and creating abilities to make their own avatar, putting everyone on a more equal creative level.

In VRChat, persons controlling avatar forms engage in a variety of communicative behaviors. Some focus on their avatar's appearance in mirrors by activating reflective surfaces in the environment and standing idly in front of them, while others trigger the "Wave" emote, watching one's selected avatar form raise its arm and move its hand back and forth in a gesture of greeting to its own reflection. Others actively seek out conversations and interactions with other persons on the server. More often than not, persons choose to engage with other persons on

the platform, viewing their avatar forms in relation to other forms and behaving accordingly as persons make assumptions about others' avatars, interpret body language, and engage in voice chat. The developers of this platform encourage this kind of interactivity, shown even in the full name of the collective virtual worlds interface: Virtual Reality Chat. Such virtual chatting requires digital bodies and the subsequent embodiment of those forms by the persons who select them. The ways in which bodies are an incarnation, objectification, and manifestation of a person, paired with the "tangible" virtual forms in VRChat, brings the conceptualization of the human form into question. Embodied virtual forms become part of one's personal identity. One recent scholarly understanding of the body posits it as a relationship "both subjective and objective, meaningful and material, personal and social" that constitutes the "'material infrastructure' of the production of selves, belonging, and identities" (Van Wolputte 2004, 256). Avatar bodies, as virtual aspects of one's embodiment, impact a person's sense of identity as one adopts and uses such forms on virtual platforms.

One way to think about the different levels of potential embodiment involved when persons inhabit various avatar forms is through a comparison with people visiting a video game convention. This type of gathering may be seen as a comparable communal space, filled with people who share similar interests but express their varying interest in very different ways and, coincidentally, are also likely to participate in virtual communities like VRChat due to the shared history between games and virtual worlds. Convention-goers show their support for companies and games in many different ways. Some may wear graphic t-shirts with relevant designs, some may cosplay – or dress up – as memorable characters and roleplay as those characters, and some may dress in a unique costume composed of diverse character elements.

Those wearing the same or similar shirts at a convention recognize their shared symbolism and relate to one another through that common interest. Each person may have a variety of interests, some of which are not indicated by their current wardrobe choice, but they find camaraderie in encountering other persons displaying a common interest through shared imagery. In VRChat, shared avatars rapidly adopted by large groups of persons are objects of fascination. Later in this paper, I include a vignette detailing my participation in one of these shared interactions which further explores the concept of collective avatar appreciation and its potential of creating additional modes of identity via shared bodily experience.

Those in full character cosplay and roleplay at a convention take on the persona of a particular character, often completely hiding their "real" personalities, appearance, and mannerisms in order to play their particular, voluntarily-chosen role. These persons become actors as they perform, with their performance as a means of self-fulfillment of a fantasy – becoming, both visually and in personality, a favored character. In his study of ritual social drama, anthropologist Victor Turner suggests that social action requires repeated performance, a reenactment and reexperience of already-established social meanings that further establishes their legitimacy within social space (Turner 1974). Persons "cosplaying" avatars reinforce on-platform and imported "real world" expectations for how certain avatars interact with others on VRChat as they select and act using these virtual bodily forms. Besides stepping into an alternate character's role, these actors are also under scrutiny from other fans that expect certain behaviors from the actor's chosen character. In VRChat, persons-turned-actors who adopt certain avatars and use them solely as vehicles for roleplaying are so fully committed to their chosen character's form that they let the avatar's qualities take over their interactions through both voice chat and emotes. A "character" in this context relates to an avatar form that refers to pop culture imagery

or media, such as Sonic the Hedgehog or Shaggy from the *Scooby-Doo!* franchise. Persons choose to act within the character's confines, emulating vocal, behavioral, and personality-based patterns of interaction, manipulating the character's virtual form within the virtual environment as the avatar manipulates how the person conducts one's virtual form within virtual space.

I encountered this kind of avatar use in an encounter with someone who took on the form of a highly-tattooed but barely-clothed curvy feminine form. After their selection, the person controlling the form engaged several consecutive custom hip-hop style dancing emotes that made their avatar sway her hips, slowly run her hands up and down the pronounced curves of her body, and "twerk" as she moved her posterior in bouncing and grinding motions with her rear end on full display as she bent slightly forward. The person then proceeded to move their female avatar closer to other avatars, allowing her motions to pantomime rubbing against those avatars. The person-turned-actor did not engage voice chat, allowing their avatar to let her body do the talking as she emoted, the virtual form moving in markedly sexual ways. However, had her actor spoken, the avatars which the female avatar "rubbed" against would have likely expected that actor to use an accompanying voice script comparable to and coherent with that avatar's sexually-charged movements, that is, speak in a sensual voice or use suggestive innuendo to parallel her erotic movements. I argue this after interacting with other persons in "unexpected" avatars myself. As a young, cisgender female person in the "real" world, other persons I encountered did not expect a "feminine" voice to "come out of" a large, polka-dotted mushroom form named Mushy. My greeting toward a group in this form did not prompt discussion but, rather, giggles and surprise, followed immediately by disinterest as the group ignored my presence. My failure to perform the "role" of the "phallic" mushroom did not draw the interest of this particular group of persons, my "unexpected" "real" identity uncovered and effectively

cutting me off from future interactions as their laughter undermined my attempted performance. My performance consisted of signs that did not conform to this group's communicative expectations, as my voice did not further signify the "masculinity" of my mushroom bodily form, which was subsequently not taken seriously by the persons who were witness to my embodiment and attempt at a communicative act. This instance hearkens to Butler's argument that "the body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations…but neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies" (Butler 1988 353). My combined use of signs – my "feminine" voice and the "masculine" avatar body – did not follow platform expectations, and I was therefore shunned from further interactions, especially enforced after I adopted a muscled, "masculine," briefs-wearing cactus form. This performance was so far from expected behavior to the point where I was not even acknowledged by this communicative group.

Those in inventive costumes at a convention come across as enhanced personalities as they don their unique, complex, often handmade outfits. These clothes augment a convention-goer's perceived individuality and agency as one wears their heart as their sleeves, putting combinations of interests and personality on full display. Unique costumes at a convention, particularly ones that combine character appearances, may cause confusion or even anger in fans who are familiar with the "right" way that characters are presented. Nonetheless, unique costumes and acts of cosplay further conversation among convention participants as they seek to understand one another. In VRChat, persons using unique avatars that they made themselves express alternate forms of self, incorporating elements of "real" identity into their selected virtual vessels. Some of these avatars combine popular culture characters within one form, but most are not characters as portrayed by convention cosplay. I encountered one of the latter examples when

I spoke to a person who was using a custom-built avatar with the foundations of a common avatar design but covered in a complementary color and included a beanie, hipster glasses, and words written across its chest that said, "Can I Ask You a Question?"

These varied ways of expressing personhood and identity coincide with different ways that avatars are used by single persons and groups of persons in VRChat. One way in which persons express their attachment to particular avatars is their willingness to switch to another form. Avatars rapidly switched between are like masquerade masks in a costume shop, tested and discarded in an act of playful experimentation. Those consistent in their avatar selection or use a particular avatar for the majority of the time are more invested in their one particular, chosen mode of self-representation as others identify them through that one visual cue. Alternately, those who change avatars may be doing so out of solidarity towards other persons in their conversational group. Taken together, the ways in which persons select and maintain chosen avatars build one's respective identity on the platform, whether one tends to metaphorically wear a t-shirt, cosplay, or unique costume in the VRChat "convention."

A person's avatar selection and sense of identity actively interact within every instance of avatar use. I argue that persons' identity on the platform consists of a combination of their avatar choices and performance within the contexts of those chosen avatars, especially as virtual reality offers a liminal space for persons to interact in novel ways within a digital realm "separate" from the "real world." According to the literature on the postmodern condition, humans maintain a fragmented sense of self across many platforms of digital technology, with such facets of identity coalescing into one's full conception of self in a posthumanist world as the growth of technologies including virtual reality expand human presence into the digital realm (Hayles 1999). Some scholars make the claim that humans are more human online, not less so as

described by posthuman ideology (Boellstorff 2008, xxvi). However, I argue that the use of posthumanism to talk about avatars and virtual worlds in general suitably applies when discussing posthuman embodiment as seen in avatar adaptation and use. The ways in which persons select and maintain avatars within VRChat demonstrate a variety of different conceptions of bodily form. Social conventions of the platform influence when persons change forms as well as personal preferences, modes of expression, and use of personal agency within this technologically-backed system of social interaction. Just as video game conference-goers express their interests and identities by wearing clothing that communicates this identification, persons on VRChat select avatars to use and embody them as virtual forms, taking on and internalizing these alternate bodies in a mutual relationship of interaction. Signifier bodies signify the person within them, and persons act and communicate on the VRChat platform in ways that shape the meanings attached to such forms.

Performing Avatar

"Join us." The small, bright-yellow bird avatar sticks its beak out at me, extending the length to several times the size of its body. The actor controlling this bird, along with two other actors as fellow bird avatars, interacted with me during most of time I spent on the site earlier that day. I decide to change my current avatar form, Unity-Chan, a female, orange-haired avatar with striped stockings, to the yellow bird avatar as a sign of solidarity and as a way to try out a new avatar form. I enter my selection menu by pressing a button on my left controller and move my right controller so that the blue, laser-like pointer generated in the VR environment points toward the bird avatar. A slightly-transparent shield shape appears around the avatar after I hover my cursor over its form. I select the avatar with my controller with the click of a controlled

button and then click the "Change Avatar" button generated by my selection menu. Suddenly, a sparkly loading animation dominates my field of vision. Once I get my bearings and exit my selection menu, I realize a drastic change in my point of view of the space – my avatar is now much shorter in comparison to Unity-Chan's height. I cannot see my avatar's hands…because I have no hands. When I move my avatar forward, I watch its small bird feet wobble in third person. As I go to join the other bird avatars, they cheer and extend their beaks in greeting.

This vignette detailing how I switched from my typical avatar form to a new form illustrates the aforementioned qualities of group participation. After a short sequence of technical magic, my status on the server changed from a lone orange-haired anime girl to part of a flock whose explicit purpose was to wobble around and chat with others as a group and implicit purpose was to try to create a unified team including as many persons as possible. The process of changing forms does not vary for different avatars, but the reasoning behind changing avatars does, particularly when considering one's respective group participation and personal attachment to certain forms, as discussed above. The ways in which a person makes decisions about selecting and changing avatar forms displays one's sense of affinity with particular forms and how one identifies oneself in relation to others on the platform. For example, I chose to change from my Unity-Chan form to the proboscis-extending bird form because I wanted to support and continue interacting with that group of persons, as well as try out the bird's interesting emote that I had never seen before. However, I quickly changed my avatar back to Unity-Chan because I felt uncomfortable viewing the world from the bird's short height. As discussed in the last section, persons choose and change avatars based on their level of attachment to each respective form, whether the form is one of many Favorites, a role-playing avatar, or something unique made by the user.

Avatars are both performed and performative. Within her examination of gender, Judith Butler differentiates between these – gender as "performed" implies a set role which one acts out and that constitutes one's gender presentation, while gender as "performative" entails that one's actions are taken together to form an image of one's gender as "gender reality is created through sustained social performances" via continual production and reproduction (Butler 1988, 354).

Avatars are "performed" as the outward appearance of avatars carries connotations for how a certain avatar should or does act via emotes. The way that avatars look – whether colorful, masculine, a character from popular culture, or any combination of these – often carries connotations for how a certain avatar should or does act via emotes, some of which are actions specific to certain avatars. The associations between a given appearance and a set of expected actions is not completely contingent on pre-existing cultural associations - sometimes expectations for people performing as certain avatars come out of VRChat culture, plus new ways of using an avatar could result in new cultural associations – but, largely, one's avatar's physical appearance and movements creates expectations of how one performs other modes of communicative interaction on the platform, like speaking through voice chat. This coincides with Goffman's writings on persona and self-presentation as a form of performance in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* as one's VRChat persona develops in terms of social interactions with other persons on the platform, with actors performing within specific contexts of environment and audience and exchanging information about identity through their behaviors in the process (Goffman 1959, 17).

On the other hand, avatars are "performative" as persons who enter VRChat and select an avatar have agency over how that avatar moves through the environment and speaks using the user's voice. This agency allows for the potential to blur expected boundaries of identity and

worlds through subversive gender expression, discussion of topics taboo in one's "real" life or expression of identity, and ability to communicate with others around the "physical" world despite potential verbal language barriers. Butler's writings on gender speak to this concept of performed versus performative, particularly when she posits persons as actors playing roles, each with a body as "materiality that bears meaning" that assists in the physical manifestation of a gender identity "instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1988, 348-349). The materiality of avatars – the colorful pixels and code that enable the user to manipulate them – carries cultural meaning. When one selects an avatar, they accept the form and all of the connotations it carries, including appropriate actions and roles that one may take in various forms. Butler's concept of performativity applies to the case of digital avatars in VRChat as persons enter the platform and collectively build the meanings behind each form with each communicative interaction shaping how each form is perceived by others and holds meaning to the persons that use it. Every "stylized repetition" of gendered markers of identity, such as a cisgender woman consistently dressing in a "feminine" fashion, constitute one acting out one's gender identity. By the same token, every time that an avatar is used a specific way constitutes a "stylized repetition" of norms and behaviors expected from that particular avatar form.

Actors on a stage are aware of the roles that they play, gaining knowledge of their parts by intently studying lines, how their characters speak and move their bodies, and their characters' personality traits. In VRChat, persons that enter the virtual environment become actors as they take on the forms of various avatars, with each form having different social, cultural, and technical contexts that limit personal agency and creativity. These avatars are simultaneously empty containers for people to fill and (often) recognizable characters with distinct personality traits and character-specific emotes. While the actor has full control over

selecting a specific avatar, its movement through virtual space, and its point of view as impacted by this movement, the digital limits of each respective avatar have full control over its appearance (since it is often pre-made before an actor's selection) and the ways in which the body moves. Players have the ability to control if, when, and how an avatar moves and emotes, but the kinds of movements and how they appear within the virtual environment very widely due to the individual design of each of these avatar forms. In this way, the avatar and person maintain an interlocking relationship as they mutually impact one another's actions and subsequent interpretations by others in the environment. One cannot be separated from the other in the virtual environment within interactions – without avatars, persons cannot effectively interact with other persons on the platform, and without persons to pilot them, avatars sit in various menus, reduced to T-posing character models made out of graphical pixels without movement.

Avatars are worn by persons like virtual skin, containing these persons within them. Whenever a person selects an avatar, they consciously choose to appear a certain way to other persons within the VRChat platform. This chosen appearance from a limited number of available options, in turn, impacts how other persons on the platform interpret that person. In conversation, persons-turned actors refer to each other either by screen name or by avatar form, showing an equal acknowledgement of the two parts to each "character" within the virtual worlds. Sometimes, however, actors are not acknowledged by name at all as others around them focus on the conversation at hand or using emotes to communicate emotions or enhance auditory output. People who enter the platform of VRChat use their adopted forms to express themselves, often in ways impossible in "real life." For example, persons choose forms that represent their interests, ranging anywhere from taking the appearance of favorite characters to obtaining desired body shape and size to emoting and communicating as a giant mushroom. Just like makeup and other

forms of costuming, persons put on and take off these fabricated layers to different degrees of

potency and creativity. This extra-bodily form is required to enter the virtual space but may also

be internalized within one's concept of self as virtual identity. In a manner similar to the "Wild

West" freedom of Internet chatrooms in the 1990s, the VRChat platform allows for persons

seeking communication with others online to become anyone or anything that they desire. Avatar

selection and creation mirrors early Internet creativity, granting agency and freedom of creativity

to those who desire it. By having control over one's selection of an avatar, persons hold some

level of control over self-expression and communication.

Each avatar design is as unique as a snowflake, yet most avatar designs may be cloned

and immediately put on from one actor to another. The existence of avatars labelled for public

use allows a pseudo-democratic space that allows for visual sharing of form. As actors in a space

share the same form, they often interact with each other in new ways. For example, in the case of

the Ugandan Knuckles avatar, a popular avatar choice for people who accessed VRChat shortly

after its initial release, crowds of actors that would select and don this avatar gathered in large

groups, spoke in the same faux Ugandan accent, and went off in search of their "queen,"

typically an anime girl with purple hair and horns. This structured pattern of behavior was

associated with this particular avatar, and this avatar only. However, behaviors displayed by

subsequent avatars inspired by the original Ugandan Knuckles avatar design continue stylized

actions often taken by persons who adapted the initial avatar design.

The knowledge that avatars are both performed and performative matters in conversation

about how avatars are interpreted as persons reflect on how personal agency and socially-

constructed norms interact within a particular embodied form.

Mutual Embodiment and Multiplicity of Worlds

The way one conceptualizes embodiment reflects the beliefs of one's culture and place within a societal framework, particularly as "the body emerges as a changing relationship that, at the same time, unfolds as an ethical horizon – and challenge – for the (un)making of self, identity, and belonging" (Van Wolputte 2004, 251). The following vignette shows a telling instance of group avatar appreciation and mutual embodiment of an avatar form that reflects the propensity of persons who enter the VRChat platform to form connections, as well as the culture facilitated through such a conglomerate of virtual worlds:

After a lengthy session selecting and emoting using various public Halloween-themed avatars available in the space, one actor in the small group changes avatar forms to display an avatar from their "Favorites" list. This avatar was added to their list from a chance encounter with another actor in VRChat who was using the form. The other actors in the group voice their approval, vocally commenting on its appearance with laughter and declarations of "Cool!" The actor proceeds to display their entire "Favorites" list of avatars, changing forms rapidly as we cheer in appreciation. There are many interesting combinations of characters that make up the avatars in their list: Sonic the Hedgehog with the face of Solid Snake, Yugi from Yu-Gi-Oh! with an emote of a JoJo's Bizarre Adventure stand, and a well-muscled nude bodybuilder (minus genitalia) with the head of a Pokémon called Togepi. This Togepi avatar receives the loudest reaction from the group, and all actors present rush to change to that avatar form. Those with more experience changing into another actor's form assist those with less experience. They guide "noobs" through the process of selecting the avatar and adjusting one's public avatar settings by patiently going step-by-step, describing the menus of VRChat and how to access them. I get lost in my menu screen, and one of the actors asks me to describe what I see. They

advise me to use the pointer generated in the platform by my Oculus controller to select the avatar of one of the actors near me. A slightly transparent field appears around the avatar as I select it and click on "Clone Public Avatar." After turning off my "Public Avatar" setting, I watch my avatar's arms, once donning blue bell-shaped sleeves, fizzle and reappear as muscled, creamy skin instead. I tighten my new form's muscles by replicating bodybuilder poses. Once we all take the buff Togepi form, we use our "real-world" controllers and keyboards to flex and manipulate its muscles, pose, emote, and give each other high-fives. We admire the well-sculpted buffness of the form as a group as we call the body "swole" in joyful amazement. One actor asks, "Wow, that guy's ripped! What happened?" Another actor exclaims, "Look!" as they reach out and pantomime slapping the rear end of the nearest actor's Togepi form. Everyone in the space bursts out in laughter, and other actors begin to do the same. "Respect the booty!" someone shouts. I join in the appreciation as well. As one actor slaps the rear of another actor's avatar, the other actor reciprocates the gesture. The actor in our informal group with the extensive "Favorites" avatar list changes forms into a buff version of Pikachu, prompting a repeated avatar-changing and assisting process. Everyone's avatars stand in a makeshift circle of mutual flexing and butt-slapping as we revel in the capabilities of our shared forms.

These actions of butt slapping might seem juvenile or even sexual, but I read this experience as a series of communication acts. By gesturing in a manner that held meaning for all involved, the persons in this group together examined the ways in which the Buff Pokémon forms appear, move, and communicate a message. This parallels with Boellstorff's observations in the virtual world of Second Life, specifically tying to avatars as means and a medium of communication as he discusses links between sociality and play. (Boellstorff 2008, 178). One's avatar selection does not necessarily coincide with one as an "individual" in the Western sense of

the term. Persons within VRChat may use the same virtual form and capabilities for communication and, therefore, occupy a shared space, opposing the Westerners view of "individuals" in the "real" world inhabiting unique, "individual" bodies." Avatar forms are widely and constantly used, shared, cloned, and manipulated, often by multiple actors at the same time and in the same virtual environment. This is the case whether a form is a Public Avatar available to anyone – "noob" and seasoned veteran alike – or a special seasonal avatar available for everyone's use during the holiday or after a certain period of time on the platform. As people use these avatars together, the Western notion of the body as a static entity unique to each individual rapidly breaks apart.

Avatars effectively become "communal" – the form stretches and expands to fit multiple actors at once. Groups of human actors often use the same avatar in acts of collective communication. Players who adopt the same avatar form examine the ways in which that form appears, moves, and communicates a message. Each person retains their own distinct form, but the persons residing together within the same space seem to stand in a mirrored funhouse, showcasing the mutually-utilized form in many separate manifestations. Actors manipulate the body together, demonstrating to one another how that form is capable of moving, emoting, and interacted with. In the case of the aforementioned bird avatar, its beak-expanding qualities lends its form to maintaining a flock of these avatars extend their beaks at one another, with each actor lengthening their orifice in a way that glitches through the forms of the other actors. In the case of a Buff Pikachu, posing like a bodybuilder, dancing, and pantomiming rear-slapping persist like how "real world" musclemen stereotypically interact with one another. The literature on competitive bodybuilding, particularly the work of Kenneth Dutton, considers the combining of visual signs to form a "perfect" masculine form, along with the relationship between

bodybuilders and audience that reinforces this form through mutual gazing (Dutton 1995). In

their work on the history of bodybuilding, Dutton and Laura trace its origins through the art

studio, the platform, and the gym, all of which emphasize the importance of feeling as "the

notion that the presentation of a muscular body so strongly appeals to the tactile sense that the

mind reproduces the sensation of touching, even though the object of appreciation is not directly

touched, may help to explain both the appeal of bodybuilding and the taboos which frequently

surround it" (Dutton and Laura 32). The actors' reaction to the well-muscled Buff Pokémon

avatars within my vignettes relates to this desire to touch these forms capable of producing

muscular flexes consistent with "real" world bodybuilding norms.

One's selected body is able to move and display itself through how that person moves

and displays the body – actors discover how bodies move and emote and continuously exploit its

distinct functionality. It is unclear if actors act this way in order to fulfill how they believe these

avatars should interact, if they act according to the ways that they believe others would expect

them to interact in a group, or some combination of these. It is worth mentioning, however, that

once one actor moves a "shared" form in a certain way, other actors often follow suit. One such

instance illustrates VRChat's capacity to allow for identity and embodiment play as actors

perform together and call singular bodily autonomy into question. The following vignette

demonstrates another instance that I witnessed in my fieldwork where persons followed the lead

of an experienced user, resulting in a collective interaction unique for a particular avatar:

My avatar stands next to the avatar of another actor. This actor is a friend in both name

and practice, having just accepted my friend request through the VRChat Social tab after we

both participated in the circle of buff Pokémon avatars. We stand in front of an actor in the form

of D.Va, a character from the videogame Overwatch, which, from my visual perspective, appears

over a story tall. This VRChat version of D.Va wears an outfit emblazoned with the name of the

avatar's creator. Staring up, my friend recounts an experience where they were part of a large-

scale avatar experiment involving multiple actors in the giant avatar form. "You know what's

funny? I was in a room with a friend of mine and there were five of us there that were that

character, and we were sitting on each other's hands!" In the same breath, my friend warns me

about the dangers of such "stacking" – VR sickness in the form of extreme nausea. They gesture

at the D.Va excitedly, drawing attention to the avatar and catching the attention of others in the

room. This prompts many actors to switch avatars, causing my game to crash because of the

sheer volume of avatar changes. After logging back into the platform and re-entering the room

where I last conversed with my friend, I hear them in another section of the room where a group

of avatars are gathered. One of the actors in the form of D.Va lifts my avatar up through the

rafters of the room in which we stand, revealing a blank black space overhead. My point of view

shifts dramatically in altitude as my virtual form rests in a new location and better place to

watch their stacking interaction. My friend assists actors in switching avatars and directing a

new "stacking" effort, pointing at various D.Va avatars and verbally directing movements in

order to bring their vision to life, offering a mixture of directives and encouragement. "Over

here! Bend down and pick him up so he'll come through the ceiling. You almost had it! Can you

get my hand? Yeah, what's up! I'm in the party now! Now use your hand and pick him up. You,

put your hand out and you, get on his hand. Now, you, hit C to crouch, do you see his hands?

Don't go too far that way, or you'll fall of the map again. Stay still, guys!" They also spearhead

the movement of avatars by actively moving their avatar along with the other actors' movements.

My friend and the other actors systematically sit on each other's avatar hands, reaching a

glowing pink-and-blue height that should have broken the environment's limits of generation and

maintenance of forms. One winged avatar flies up alongside the tower of D.Va avatars, rising

into the black abyss above.

In VRChat, the line between one's avatar form and the forms of other persons becomes blurred when interaction between persons involves the rapid adoption and manipulation of different avatars in a group. By working together, groups of avatars that adopt the same avatar and communicate in novel ways expand the capabilities of virtual forms and bodies in general. In his writings on the "body-self," Van Wolputte claims that "the human body emerges as the meeting ground of both hegemony and counterhegemonic practices, power and defiance, authority and subversion. This body, though, extends far beyond the human organism, in space and time, in animals or in things" (Van Wolputte 2004, 260). In the case of the aforementioned D.Va stack, the persons involved manipulated their virtual forms to create a bodily structure impossible in the "real world." By virtually constructing a new point of view, these persons literally broke through the roof of both societal expectations and the technology used to create the platform, subverting typical limits of the human body through virtual means.

Just as persons emulate actions of other actors, following the lead of already-conducted or in-progress interactions, "immersion in virtual worlds governs reality in the sense that virtual environments often guide interaction, discussion, and the general sense of virtual being…one's ability to visualize and project oneself provides a foundation in terms of disembodiment and re-embodiment – two key aspects of virtuality" (Graffam 2012, 140). In this way, posthumanism can help conceptualize avatars as alternative forms of embodiment that encapsulate human cultures and societies in a way that expands the definition of "human" as "…examining the figure of the posthuman proves valuable to understanding questions of virtuality, materiality, and embodiment that attend the reconfigured relations of space, time, and being in the cultural worlds

of the computer-mediated sociality." (Cool 2012, 33). The extent to which theoretical paradigms like "posthumanism" are a result of human technological changes impacts the way that persons view embodiment practices, calling the "reality" of the world into question. Although the term 'post' in 'posthumanism' implies an 'after' or 'beyond' the human, avatars draw upon and influence what it means to be human as the "virtual" system and the "real" culture, society, community, and technology meld together through means of embodiment. Posthumanism can help examine attitudes toward avatar embodiment in VRChat as its affordance of fluidity of form represents a new spectrum of bodily potential.

VRChat enables the manifestation of actors' desires to perform and bond over experiences of embodiment in a way that encourages a multiplicity of worlds. Methods of describing avatar movement, from solo admiration to group interaction, vary depending upon the avatar, changing between the use of different emotes and different actor behaviors and controls of avatar forms. These movements enable nonverbal communication of desires, some of which may be subversive or taboo in the "real world."

Subverting Norms and Blurring Lines

The following vignette demonstrates this blurred division as "real" societal norms and the limitations of technology impact how I am able to interact with other actors on the platform:

My chosen avatar – in the form of Unity-Chan – stands near the bar of the Void Nightclub, avatar-watching. An actor controlling a bird avatar with long, skinny legs invites me to join them behind the bar and offers me a glass filled with blue liquid, floating the glass close enough for my avatar to reach. Taking the glass in my virtual hand by pressing the corresponding button on my controller, I hold it up in a gesture of "cheers." I move my arm in

order to put it to my avatar's mouth, tilting my head back as I watch the liquid in the glass

decrease and (presumably) slide down my avatar's throat. I exhale in satisfaction, paralleling

how I would typically react to a delicious "real life" drink. Some blue liquid remains in the

virtual glass, and I gently move my arm and release the button control to set it down on the bar.

A different avatar in the room approaches, under the direction of its human actor, after seeing

me drink the (presumably) alcoholic beverage. They accusingly ask about my age. I feel a brief

sense of panic as I am called out for breaking the law, even though I meet the "real-world"

drinking age requirement in the United States. After I tell the bird avatar that I'm twenty-one,

they declare their unbelief. I frantically try to gesture my age with my hands, attempting to show

my age with my avatar's fingers. In order to do this, I have to hold both Oculus controllers while

keeping my hands free enough to display digits that the technology will sense and translate to my

virtual form. I fumble with my fingers, trying to flash the number of my years without dropping

my "real world" controller, first with sets of five, then with a "2" and a "1." "Three?" the bird

says. I feel my face flush as my avatar form drops her arms in sync with my frustration. In the

end, I give up on trying to prove my age and move my avatar away from the bar.

Norms from the "real" lives of actors are carried over the perceived border of the virtual

realm – in this case, VRChat as a "game" – and violated constantly in flexible interaction.

Subversion creates a multiplicity of worlds as constant, open negotiation of boundaries

manipulates the constructed "real" and "virtual" dichotomy. In VRChat, persons may engage in

the consumption of alcohol no matter their age – although you do have to be thirteen years old to

access the platform – or even if one is questioned by another person in the virtual world.

Nonetheless, "real" societal norms and laws, along with the limitations of technology, do impact

how persons interact with other persons on the platform, as one can see from the above vignette.

Additionally, persons who enter VRChat often have conversations about their "real" lives with others in the environment, contrasting "real" experiences with "virtual" or "in-game" experiences. Other anthropologists have encountered this distinction in their studies of virtual worlds. In her review article about virtuality, Nardi conceptualizes the distinction by using the folk phrase "real world" to oppose the virtual, explaining that gamers use that distinction because they "have to call it something" in order to denote a sense of tangible "realness" apart from experience in various virtual worlds (Nardi 2015, 20). This dichotomy helps persons who enter the "virtual" put their lived experiences into context and attempt to keep interactions within separate spheres.

At the same time, however, the structure of virtual worlds intentionally encourages blending between "real" and "virtual." "Virtual" landscapes, objects, and human figures are often purposefully created to emulate or even augment "real" landscapes, objects, and human figures. Interacting in the "virtual" relies on "real" spaces, technology, and, to a certain extent, norms. Nothing made by humans is created in a social or cultural vacuum, and, therefore, common structures of thought using opposing dualities bleed into the ways that creations are viewed and interacted with and within. A virtual world is a human world, in the sense that humans construct and imagine worlds for human interaction and exploration.

The ability to subvert societal norms through technology makes virtual worlds like the ones in VRChat great candidates for feminist space. Feminist theory in general has "sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context." (Butler 1988, 350). Viewing these worlds through this lens "[has] influenced virtual

worlds research by providing conceptual and practical tools not just for interrogating gender, but also for looking at processes of cultural construction and how virtual worlds come into being and change over time" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 19). Technology has the potential of breaking apart dichotomies reinforced through patriarchal and deterministic notions of politics and conceptions of the body through presence of "in-between" category of "cyborg," particularly as "cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 1991, 181). This, in turn, follows N. Katherine Hayles' writings on the posthuman condition as virtual avatars enable potential posthuman embodiment and open the potential for a multiplicity of worlds discussed within the ontological turn of anthropological thought (Hayles 1999).

Layers of Communicative Interaction

One may try to search for a single core purpose underlying VRChat amid the varying levels of avatar embodiment and virtual social interaction in order to generalize or make sense of everything occurring on the platform. However, my time within this space served only to demonstrate that no such communicative foundation existed. During my first stay of fieldwork within VRChat, I was struck by the wide variation of interactions between persons. Below is a vignette that demonstrates this communicative chaos most clearly:

In the form of Unity-Chan, I stand on an expansive platform. The purple-hued, square stage lined with a glowing grid design floats in the middle of Club Kaleidoscope, a darkened, neon nightclub filled with slight ambient sounds. Other avatars wander nearby, occasionally moving toward each other and forming informal groups. Two avatars, one with red hair and wearing a leather jacket and the other in the form of a default gray robot, are engaged in

friendly conversation. They stand closely together, speaking at a thoughtful pace. An actor in the

form of small, spiny avatar with a Fiji Water bottle attached to its back hovers around me. We

perform various emotes at each other with our avatars, executing backflips, waves, and dances.

An anime girl avatar with black spiky armor holds a camera modeled after a vintage VHS

recorder at arm's length, pointing it at herself as she moves around the platform. She sets the

camera down and, after backing away from it, crawls forward, watching her face grow larger in

the lens. The camera feed, capturing the growing image of the anime avatar, plays in real time

on the ceiling of the club. Her face multiplies, breaking and refracting in a kaleidoscope pattern

above the clusters of avatars. She picks the camera up again and hands it to me, but my avatar

immediately loses grip. The camera goes flying across the space, spinning slowly and floating

above a lower section of the club, and I move across the platform to retrieve it. At the same time,

the red-haired avatar and the robot avatar, now in the form of a large stick of butter with a

smiley face and stick figure legs, converse intensely about their lives outside of this reality,

discussing happiness, identity, and taking life for granted. They reassure each other, thoughtfully

offering advice and examples as the conversation shifts fluidly from one topic to another. The

Fiji Water and anime girl avatars follow me as I move my avatar to a lower level of the club. The

lowermost floor also transforms everything recorded by the camera into kaleidoscope patterns

beneath our feet. The anime girl takes the camera back as the Fiji Water creature changes

avatars rapidly, shifting between a character sporting a fedora and a machine gun, a black-and-

white cat called Morgana from the video game Persona 5, and a wild-eyed girl with downturned

fox ears and tail, displaying the avatar-specific emotes for each form. They ask, "What does this

one do?" with each successive avatar performance and emote. I try to describe each emote by

moving my avatar in response and verbally describing what I see. Hearing the shifting

conversation between the red-haired avatar and the large stick of butter, our group of avatars

makes its way back to the upper platform. We listen as we move our avatars around the platform,

which has turned to the continued development of technology making life easier and the

subsequent curse of having too many opportunities in life without a sense of destiny. The Fiji

Water avatar changes into a short, blue-haired anime girl avatar. They turn the avatar around,

pondering, "I wonder what this one does. Let me try…" Standing in a circle of bright white-blue

light two feet away from the philosophy-discussing avatars, the blue-haired girl dances to

Japanese theme music that intermixes with their discussion and debate about reality.

This extended vignette displays many different aspects of interaction within VRChat, emphasizing the varied ways that human actors communicate with one another in this environment. Every interaction within virtual worlds involves communication in multiple modes simultaneously, and all of these interactions require avatar forms and the questions of embodiment wrapped up within them.

Conclusion

This work is relevant because of its timeliness – VRChat as a platform is in its "coming of age" period before its full release. Ethnographic fieldwork in this new environment and in other virtual worlds encourages further anthropological study of the digital as scholars consider new technology and "new media" communication in their work, though this technology should not be treated as completely novel. Additionally, this work holds an important place within scholarly conversation, connecting to key concepts like virtuality, embodiment, performativity, postmodern understandings of self in relation to other persons, sociality and play. By connecting my work to larger anthropological theories and concepts, I hope to parse how digital platforms

and virtuality have the potential to grant actors the ability to subvert traditional identity categories and create affinities. Further study will further increase understanding of how persons express themselves and relate to digital environments, particularly within the concept of "human activity mediated through multiple digital technologies" and fundamentally involved in "complex activity occurring within an intricate web of digital mediations (Nardi 2015, 16).

One's forms of self-expression contribute to one's overall identity and sense of self. The embodiment of a virtual avatar form in a virtual space constitutes such a self-expression, particularly as persons explore a strange yet familiar digitized environment. The virtual vehicles that persons select and manipulate in order to interact with others in virtual environments may become very personal and precious. This closeness creates a multitude of potential implications of the technology used within the VRChat platform. Jeremy Bailenson, a virtual reality expert and researcher, makes the case that virtual reality can increase human empathy (Bailenson 2018). By studying in virtual worlds, "we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos" (Haraway 1999, 173). Virtual platforms like VRChat provide a way of "leveling the playing field" as persons of different races, religions, and identities are able to inhabit virtual bodies and interact in a virtual space, taking on new forms and, potentially, new identities online. However, this feminist notion of equality does not always apply, as people who interact on the VRChat platform make assumptions about one another via how one's voice sounds over voice chat and about the "real world" identity of any given person based upon one's chosen avatar form. Additionally, the risk of "identity tourism" exists as persons choose forms that temporarily grant one a different virtual race. Serious danger exists in this, particularly if these persons claim to understand what it means to be a person of a particular

race, when really, they only inhabited a form for a short time and chose it primarily for aesthetic reasons.

 The VRChat platform's avatars and created worlds impact "real" distinctions perpetuated through the dominant narrative of dichotomies and power relations, having real implications on understandings of self and communication between persons. Whether butt-slapping or building a tower or sipping on a virtual beverage, entering virtual worlds like the ones in VRChat can reveal a lot about the ways that persons communicate and express themselves together.

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