Girl, Pixelated – Narrative Identity, Virtual Embodiment, and *Second Life* [*]

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the reasons for, and consequences of, expanding our notions of human embodiment to virtual worlds. Increasingly, it is within virtual environments that we seek to extend, and enhance, who we are. Yet, philosophical worries persist about what sorts of selves count as moral agents, and the extent to which self-enhancements affect personal identity and agency. This paper critiques and expands the discourse on embodiment and personal identity by locating it within the virtual environments of *Second Life*, challenging the prevailing limitations of what counts as identity-constituting embodiment. I argue that more inclusive notions of embodiment make possible a deeper understanding of its moral and epistemic force that constitutes and locates our identities in a universe of shared moral understandings. Thus, by including enhanced virtual embodiments alongside the non-virtual, not only do we expand our ideas of what it might mean to be embodied, but we also deepen our moral vocabularies of the self.

> ...I'd think, That ain't me, that ain't my face. It wasn't even me when I was trying to be that face. I wasn't even really me then; I was just being the way I looked, the way people wanted. It don't seem like I ever have been me.
> — Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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Introduction

In *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain,* Antonio Damasio has famously argued against the separation of mind, body, rationality and emotions, and, as a corollary, for the primacy of embodiment in human experience, claiming that "[n]ature appears to have built the apparatus of rationality not just on top of the apparatus of biological regulation, but also *from* it and *with* it" (Damasio, 1994, p. 128). Others, including Merleau-Ponty, have agreed, noting that our embodied contacts with the world, and with other human beings, always precede the linguistic and reflective treatment of these encounters: We are often delayed in our accounts of what happened, always piecing together stories, reasons, and language about our experiences after the fact, while our embodied lives, whatever else they might be, are always firmly grounded in the now -- in the unrefined immediacy of the encounter between our bodily senses and the outside world. Gradually, views began to emerge that took seriously the proposition that we are subjects embedded in environments and enmeshed in contexts, and that embodiment was not something to be considered apart from our self-concept and perception -- or, indeed, in conflict with them -- but as an unavoidable, fundamental fact about who we are, and how we develop our reasons, desires, and selves.

Yet this gradual openness to the body as an intrinsic part of the self, and to embodiment as a moral, rather than just a physical, notion, also serves as a reminder that the body remains a contested site. Serious worries about what sorts of bodies "count" as "legitimate," how they are perceived, and how they are psychosocially located has occupied many of the feminist, queer, disability, race, and other theorists, who have argued for a broader, deeper, and more nuanced understanding of burdened embodiments. This paper, although quite sympathetic to this work, attempts to extend, and thus re-theorize, embodiment as a locus of self in a way that transforms and challenges its existing boundaries.

Specifically, I focus on the reasons for, and consequences of, expanding our notions of gendered embodiment to virtual worlds. My claim is made against the aforementioned background of serious worries about how contested bodies are perceived, and the effect this perception has on personal identity. Specifically, I argue that our ideas of a world in which we are embodied ought to include the virtual environments where increasingly large numbers of us spend our time. I suggest that virtual worlds, such as *Second Life,* challenge

the theoretical limitations of what counts as identity-constituting embodiments. The central questions that this paper asks are: (1) How does one sense one's pixelated body as one's own, and how does this experience contribute to one's sense of who one is as an embodied being? (2) Specifically, what do virtual embodiments offer to the identity-constituting narratives of those who might be in some ways "othered" in the non-virtual world? and

(3) What is the significance of these findings for our theorizing about the relationships between the body and one's identity? I claim that by allowing virtual embodiments to be considered alongside non-virtual ones as constitutive parts of one's identity, not only do we expand our notions of what it might mean to be an embodied being, but we also deepen our moral vocabularies of the self. This paper, then, is about taking new worlds, and our embodiment in them, seriously.

1. Narrative and The Embodied Self

Given that this paper is premised on the notion that embodiment is a fundamental fact of who we are, how we perceive, and how we are perceived, I begin with an examination of embodiment's narrative structure, and suggest that it is this narrative quality that connects it to identity formation. I take this initial scene-setting to be essential for three reasons: First, it provides an overview of what I take narrative embodiment to mean. Second, it demonstrates the connection between embodiment and personal identity. Finally, it provides a descriptive and evaluative language and a conceptual vocabulary that just might offer us a way to re-imagine embodiment.

What the concept of embodiment is -- or, more precisely, what they are -- is a complicated question. In "What Makes a Body?",Mark Johnson distinguishes five dimensions of human embodiment: (1) biological; (2) ecological; (3) phenomenological; (4) social; and (5) cultural. He argues that although they are not readily reducible to each other, all of these varieties of embodiment are interrelated and interdependent (Johnson, 2008, p. 164-166). I suggest that the way in which they come together in a self (or, indeed, selves) is through what might most accurately be understood as a narrative process. I begin with two fundamental questions: what is the embodied self, and how is that embodied self narratively constituted?

Although this paper problematizes what I suggest are new, and important, kinds of embodiment, the notion of human embodiment as a normative

concept that is central to concerns about identity and the self is at the center of a rich and broad discourse that incorporates ethical, metaphysical, epistemic, and sociopolitical dimensions (See Parfit, 1984; Ricouer, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1992; Lindemann, 1997; Meyers, 1997; Atkins, 2000). The claim is this: we live as, with, and through, our bodies. We think, make decisions, and act in ways that express our, and others', understandings of ourselves as embodied beings in a sociophysical universe. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty has argued that perception and consciousness (as well as other aspects of experiencing) are not abstract, theoretical constructs, but are reflections of a world understood and expressed through the body. The self is thus necessarily an embodied one in that our bodies are neither detached from experience, nor secondary to it. Simply, they are a part of the world in which we find ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1992).

This seems largely right. Indeed, it is through my body's sensory and motor capacities that first I encounter the world and understand myself as a particular being, as me, reflecting and reasoning about it only as a result of such encounters (Atkins, 2000). It is through my body that I first learn hot and cold, light and dark, and often, love and its absence. To the extent that I am able, I situate myself in the world as a particular kind of body, with some limitations that are both shareable with others, and limitations that are unique, private, or not readily visible.

Indeed, and despite Derek Parfit's protestations, it matters to me what happens to my body, that it continue to exist, and that it occupy certain positions in the world (say, that of someone who is not tortured) and not occupy others (say, that of someone forced into sex trade) (Parfit, 1984). Thus, as my body instructs me as to my possibilities and limitations, I begin to understand the sort of creature that I am in relation to all the other creatures, as well as the sort of creature that I am uniquely. Or, as Atkins argues,

> [w]hen I hold something in my hand I not only feel the texture and temperature of the object, but I gauge those qualities *against* my own skin; I feel the frailty of an eggshell against the musculature of myhand, the coolness of ice against the warmth of my blood, the sharpness of glass against the fleshiness of my palm. (Atkins, 2000, p. 336)

One only needs to consider what happens when such bodily perspective is placed in jeopardy by a disease, as in the case of Oliver Sacks "The Disembodied Lady" (Sacks, 1985). Before a routine surgery to remove her gallbladder, the patient, Christina, became unable to stand (unless she looked

directly at her feet), or to maneuver her limbs, and was increasingly incapable of controlling or feeling her body. Greatly distressed, she reported herself to be "disembodied" (Sacks, 1985). Her condition, a loss of proprioception, which allows us to feel our bodies as properly ours -- to be connected to them, and in charge of their actions -- was eventually diagnosed as a rare case of sensory polyneuropathy (Sacks, 1985). Christina's loss of proprioception made impossible exactly those sensations and actions that are both bound, and made possible by, my corporeal existence – by the sensation of the ongoing reality of my particular embodiment (even though the facts or the qualities of this embodiment may change throughout my lifetime). Thus, my embodiment is not just evidenced by my sensations of the world through my body, but also through a recognition of my abilities and limitations. As Atkins rightly notes, it is the body that "allow[s] me to conceive of myself...as both a thing in the world and as a subject of the world" (Atkins, 2000, p. 336).

Yet understanding oneself as an embodied self is not a monologue, nor is it unidirectional. My body is not merely the way through which I experience and interpret the world – it is through this body that the outside world views, interprets, and tells me what it sees. As Lindemann, Walker, Schechtman, Atkins, and I have argued elsewhere, the embodied self narrates, but not just to itself -- it tells stories in part to find some validation of its own embodied experiences in the world of embodied others in order to engage with them in what Walker has called shared moral understandings (Schechtman, 1996; Lindemann, 1997; Walker, 1997; Atkins, 2000, Gotlib, 2009). That is, because we are fundamentally social, our sense of who we are as embodied beings also very much depends on the perspectives and attitudes of others, and is thus very much a narrative collaboration between one's stories and those of many proximate and distant others. This intersubjectivity takes the form of many diverse narratives by, and about, me. And it is the possibility of their uptake as credible and valued that has a lot to do with my perceived legitimacy as a credible and valued embodied moral agent. In other words, my embodied self -- who I am, where I belong, what I seem to be able to do (and not do), what duties and rights I might claim, what views others might have of me, and so on -- is shaped out of the first, second, and third person stories that come to define me within shared social, political, and moral spaces.

What this suggests is that despite our first-personal embodied encounter with the world, from our first moments, we are defined, evaluated -- indeed, even created -- by embodied others: We are born through the bodies of

others, we are wounded, praised, loved, and sometimes killed through the bodies of others, and, in the end, we require those others in our final moments. I am viewed by the outside world as a body with long, dark hair, or in a bright dress, or as short, tall, fat, thin, with blue eyes, with brown eyes. Or sometimes, more significantly, one who is brown, black, white, male or female or neither or both. A body that can walk, or cannot.A body that is relatively intact – or is not. That is, I not only perceive, but also am perceived, through my body -- I am seen, felt, heard, and evaluated as a physical presence. And these stories of and about my body become a part of the constitution of my identity. I begin to see myself as short, tall, male, or female not only descriptively but normatively, with all of the social, psychological, and moral baggage that these labels impose. And I am shaped as a moral agent by this seeing, feeling, hearing, touching -- I integrate into my identity all the normative judgments, valuations, rules, rights, and affections that first find their way through my embodied self.

To summarize, embodiment is not only a fact about us as human beings, but also creates the necessary corporeal perspectives from which we are able to participate, well or poorly, in life itself. Indeed, changes within and without my body can alter the nature and quality of my lived experiences: illnesses, accidents, parenthood, different physical and social surroundings, and so on can alter one's horizons while introducing an awareness of some very different features of one's now altered world. And how I attune and re-attune my perceptions of my lived experiences is a matter of narrative creation, of storytelling. As Atkins reminds us, this social, narrative approach to embodied identities

> has been central to much feminist and civil rights scholarship, for example, which has demonstrated some of the ways in which the social significance of the female body has limited the kinds of experiences that women have been able to have, and so has limited the meaningfulness of the worlds and lives which women have lived. The valuing and devaluing of certain bodily capacities and the social practices in which those values are expressed informs one's view of the world at the same time that it forms one's sense of who one is. Those socially articulated values determine what it is like to *be* female, black, handicapped, working class, etc. I become intelligible to myself through the regard of others, through the subject positions I can occupy in social discourse. Therefore, my sense of who I am and what is 'mine' cannot be isolated from my social setting. (Atkins, 2000, p. 341)

Thus, the question of who we are -- our identities -- is not only fundamentally connected to the fact of our embodiment, but also to the stories we, and others, tell about this embodiment, and the kinds of moral agents we become as a result. What I turn to now is an extension of this discussion of embodiment into new narratively-constituted virtual spaces of *Second Life*.

2. Embodiment 2.0

Before proceeding any further, it seems important, both epistemically and for the sake of clarity, to locate myself within the discourse on enhanced virtual embodiment generally, and within *Second Life (SL)* particularly. Even though this project grew out of my ongoing research into issues of identity formation, narrative practices, and the importance of embodiment in moral work, I initially came to *SL* as a curiosity, partially motivated by philosophical worries about virtual identities, partially moved by my interest in fictional universes, and, perhaps most personally, because I wanted to see *what it was like*. What I discovered was not merely beyond what I expected in terms of the seriousness with which participants constituted and regarded their virtually-embodied selves, but also far exceeded the extent to which I imagined myself to be drawn into this new, strange-yet-familiar world. Thus, although I did not approach my time within *SL* as a formal field study, I nevertheless do rely, at least to some extent, on personal experiences, encounters, and reactions in making some of my claims and conclusions, situating them within the theoretical background provided by my previous work on identity, embodiment, and narrative. However, importantly, for the sake of factual rigor and a broader view of *SL* as a phenomenon, I also focus on the more structured (and extended) ethnographic and anthropological data of Boellstorff and McKeon and Wyche, among others.

So what is *Second Life*? Launched in 2003 by Linden Lab, it is intentionally designed as an environment that is to some extent a blank canvas (with a number of rules) to be peopled, imagined, and constructed by its users. Largely inspired by the hyper-reality of the "Metaverse" environments of Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*, *SL* is intended to echo his radical vision of users who conduct the majority of their lives while fully immersed in its non-physical spaces. Indeed, it was to become exactly that: a place where anyone could create an avatar body, as well as the space that the body occupies, limited mainly by one's imagination and technical abilities (Boellstorff, 2008).

Although more recently, its popularity has somewhat weakened, the users of *SL* have been known to number in the millions. I begin by considering how *SL* resembles a narratively embodied landscape, and why this matters.

2.1 Virtual bodies, virtual spaces

If *SL* is to be understood as a new arena for theorizing human embodiment, perhaps the best way to start is to view it as a reflection of the familiar tasks of embodiment -- communicating, working, setting up a household, dancing, and so on. In many ways, *SL* is very much like any other intersubjective space, where bodies congregate and *do things*, alone or together. The difference, of course, is that these bodies are not flesh-and-bone, and the "spaces" in which they congregate are not spaces in the usual senses of the term. In fact, they might at first seem to be no different from the characters in video games -- pixelated heroes and heroines, dressed in often skimpy or otherwise revealing clothing; or else creatures who do not share any of our human corporeal shapes at all. But the pixelation and appearance, I suggest, is where the similarity to video games often ends.

Generalizing a bit to the more advanced, later generations of video games, while playing, one very consciously and deliberately participates in two kinds of practices: (1) the aesthetic practices of creating one's avatar; and, more importantly, (2) the instrumental practices of using one's avatar for a largely singular purpose: to succeed at whatever objectives the game requires. The rules and the functions of the game-avatar are strictly set, and one (generally) cannot engage in activities that have little to do with the *telos* of a given game (or one does so at one's peril, resulting in, for example, being "killed" or otherwise eliminated). And while one can certainly project oneself into the game-avatar and see him or her as the continuation of one's self, that projection is usually limited in scope: one is a warrior for only as long as the virtual battle lasts, at which point both the simulation and the projection are over. That is, the user, in her connection to her avatar, is necessarily limited by the rules governing the game -- she cannot engage her creation in activities that might be meaningful to her if they lie beyond the moves prescribed by the game's design. Or, put another way, one is limited by the stories already written by others -- one is necessarily guided by master narratives that enforce character, teleology, and generally frame one's deliberative spaces in a way that

limits both what the deliberation can be about, and how the products of that deliberation might be enacted on the screen.

By contrast, *SL* has no teleology that is enforced from the outside. Certain in-world rules of conduct notwithstanding, participants are not bound by a third-personal notion of what it means to "win," how to "play," or what limits to place on one's avatar. In most ways that count, one is on one's own not only in terms of where one spends one's time in this virtual universe, but also how one does so, with whom, and what the experience might mean or signify. Designed on what has come to be known as an open-world, or a "sandbox," model, individuals within the *SL* universe are free to create, explore, and interact with each other, and with their environments, in ways that were previously reserved solely for encounters within the physical world. Like children in a sandbox who are limited mostly by their own imaginations, abilities, and desires, *SL* participants are not constrained by pre-existing objectives or storylines of its developers. What this suggests is that the virtual landscape of *SL,* unlike a video game, with its linear, instrumental story-lines and goals, much more resembles our non-linear, complex, and fairly open-ended corporeal environment. But perhaps the simplest way to think about *SL* is this: it is much less like a choose-your-own-adventure book in which the reader is asked to select among several possible pre-written story-lines, and thus endings, and much more like a book with blank pages and colored pencils with which I can write the story of who I am – in which I can continue creating an identity, rather than enact a role or complete a task wholly authored by another.

These new identities, one's avatars, similarly have no pre-established limits, save for those imposed by the technology itself. Whether on a whim or as a result of deliberate planning, one can switch between species or create hybrids, consisting of human beings, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects. In the absence of meta-narratives, the stories to be told with and through one's avatars (one can have multiple embodiments) can be as quotidian as setting up, and running, a virtual household, or number among those much less ordinary, stretching one's non-virtual self intellectually, emotionally, sexually, and yes -- physically. To what extent participants actually engage in the more adventurous embodiments will be addressed a bit later, but for now, what is at issue is whether the possibilities for such bodily imaginaries, and the subsequent radical narratives of the self, are present within *SL.* Indeed, they are.

Given the above, I can now make two claims about *SL:* First, the relationships of *SL* users to their virtual spaces and avatars are different from other non-physical encounters not just in degree, but in kind. Rather than allowing the user to participate in a (however complex) pre-established set of meanings and possibilities (for action, for identity creation, for ways of being), genuine practices of narrative meaning-making emerge that, due to this open-endedness, begin to cross the boundaries between the corporeal and the virtual. Thus, the virtual world of *SL* in important ways reflects the corporeal, distinctly *narrative* spaces of the physical universe, where individuals and groups come to create, witness, and morally engage with each other's stories.

Second, these practices of creating and manipulating one's avatar in virtual spaces open up new possibilities for what embodiment itself means by challenging many of our established norms of bodily identity and physical constitution in two distinct ways: first, by *extending* the self into a virtual domain; second, by *transcending* the physical self through a narrative engagement with certain aspects of one's identity that have remained hidden, that were previously unknown to the participant herself, or the expression of which was unsafe in physical spaces. I now turn to the questions of how *SL*'s participants engage in these practices, and why they are so significant for the development of their identities.

2.2 The avatar and its possibilities

One's avatar -- its selection, design, and manipulation -- is central to both extending and transcending of the physical self. "Avatar," derived from the Sanskrit *avatara*, suggests "the idea of a kind of transubstantiation, the incarnation of life in a different form" (Tofts, 2003, p. 56). I take this etymology to be significant, not merely because it differentiates the making of one's avatar from merely temporarily borrowing a character for a limited purpose, but because it is suggestive of the possibility that the act of avatar creation has something to do with fundamental changes in one's identity-constituting stories. The thought goes something like this: In engaging in the practices of making an avatar, we both transfer a part of ourselves to this entity, but also experience an expansion in the definition of who we take ourselves to be, partly as a result of placing ourselves in this new "skin."

This "transubstantiation" takes place in the following manner: The process of creating an avatar begins with selecting a name (along with a "birth date,"

the only element that cannot be altered). Although in its initial form, the avatar is a rather "basic" male-or-female body, its complexity increases with nearly endless customizability. In its finished form, an avatar can appear as a human male, female, neither, or both; or child; or, indeed, as an animal, a magical creature, or even an inanimate object, such as a spaceship or a boat. What one does with one's avatar is really up to its creator: without a pre-existing narrative of either self or space, authorship can be as simple or as complex as one desires. In fact, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff suggests that in the world of *Second Life*, embodiment could be almost anything:

> A man spends his days as a tiny chipmunk, elf, or voluptuous woman. Another lives as a child and two other persons agree to be his virtual parents. Two "real"-life sisters living hundreds of miles apart meet every day to play games together or shop for new shoes for their avatars. The person making the shoes has quit his "real"-life job because he is making over five thousand U.S. dollars a month from the sale of virtual clothing. A group of Christians pray together at a church; nearby another group of persons engages in a virtual orgy...Not far away a newsstand provides copies of a virtual newspaper with ten reporters on staff; it includes advertisements for a "real"-world car company, a virtual university offering classes, a fishing tournament, and a spaceflight museum with replicas of rockets and satellites. (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 17)

An individual can also have a number of avatars (called "alts"), all with different names, and very often with different enough characteristics that it becomes a challenge (if not an impossible task) to figure out if different alts belong to the same user. This emphasis on authorship, rather than on skillful direction-following or clever manipulation of set choices, can be understood as a shifting away from role-playing, and a move toward "being oneself", or extending oneself, in virtual space (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 117). Indeed, *SL* offers an experience that is immediately, and intimately, embodied – one that is not a weak simulation of corporeal life, but a continuation of it in another guise that at times proves to be a more accurate reflection of one's subjective identity:

> Residents, for instance, might say that a particular animated chair caused their avatar to sit in an "unnatural" manner in comparison to the more "natural" animation they typically used. Virtual embodiment could even be understood as more authentic than actual-world embodiment; as one *Second Life* resident put it, "this is how I see myself on the inside." (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 134)

Using this unique virtual body (and communicating either through spoken or typed speech), one can engage in a number of identity-constituting activities: (a) Casual communication, where one might converse with other individuals as a part of "interest groups," such as film buffs, political enthusiasts, and yes, even those interested in philosophy; (b) Commerce, involving the making, selling, advertising, and buying of property, clothing, and so on for use in *Second Life,* but also extending the SL economy, with its currency, the Linden Dollars (L$), into the corporeal world by allowing participants to transfer their profits between the *SL* economy and their corporeal bank in "meatspace"; (c) Education: Several institutions, such as colleges, libraries, and government entities, use *Second Life* as a platform either to conduct research, or sometime, offer courses or information about their activities; (d) Music and the arts: Plays are performed by avatars, and artists display (and sell) their physical and virtual works (some of which would not be possible in the corporeal world, whether due to physical limitations, costs, or both) while musicians perform "live" concerts; (e) Virtual workplaces: Companies take advantage of the virtual spaces for meetings or training programs.

SL is also the forum for a number of religious groups and traditions, including a not insignificant representation of "alternative" beliefs and practices. This is not to mention the numerous islands, clubs, stores, restaurants, bars, and "special interest" areas, as well as the thousands of private residences that populate *SL.* By remaining largely grounded in the kinds of activities that make up large portions of our corporeal lives, *SL* extends our "first world" embodied selves into the virtually embodied domain, allowing them to connect emotionally, as during a virtual funeral for a corporeal person, or else through new mixed corporeal-virtual spaces for art and commerce, as during an artist's exhibit of his gravity-defying works to be sold for real dollars, but able to be displayed only in the owner's *SL* home.

This "realness" of *SL* is not only measured by the kinds of activities within it, but by self-reported accounts of what it is like to be a participant. Indeed, individuals reported that "in world," they feel more like "themselves," more like their "inner selves" then in the physical world. An in-world resident noted that in *Second Life*, "you can be who you are, not your [actual-world] body" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 135-136). Although a number of participants tailor their avatars as closely to their physical appearance as possible and, if we are to trust self-reporting, strive for both physical and personality consistency

between their physical and virtual selves, an even larger number do not. What this tendency suggests is that how one's identity is expanded within the virtual environment is not merely a matter of combining one's physical and virtual selves. Yet, as I have come to understand, for many, neither is it just a matter of creating a virtual persona for the sheer joy of experimentation with the new and the unfamiliar. In fact, the process of creating and living through an avatar becomes a kind of transcendence of one's physically-embodied self. This transcendence is the freedom to be otherwise, and to experiment with various embodiments, stories, and identities that are not possible, or are *viewed* as not possible or taboo, in the physical world. In other words, what I am calling "transcendence" here can be understood as a counterstory -- or counterstories -- "written" by *Second Life* participants through the practices of avatar creation and enactment. And the possibility of such transcendence, however conceived, presents a formidable challenge to the notions of the virtual as insignificant or morally-ephemeral.[1]

The idea that the virtual is an unserious use of the participant's time, and thus largely uninteresting to outside observers, is not new. In addressing some of the related worries surrounding the epistemic "realness" and the moral authenticity of the *SL* experience, Marya Schechtman, relying in part on the findings of ethnographer Annette Markham, suggests that rather than serving as a mere game or an inconsequential activity that is peripheral to one's core concerns, virtual embodiment is exactly the opposite -- it is, in fact, a new kind of identity-constituting *reality:*

> Markham reports that she "found reason to destabilize a traditional idea that the experience of reality is grounded in the physical, embodied world." To her surprise, she says, the residents she engaged with the question "What is really real?" told her "this question was of little relevance to them; rather everything that is experienced is real...[and] our virtual relationships are just as real as our rl [real life] ones." (Schechtman, 2012, p. 331)

[1] In fact, Raffaele Rodogno has argued that "online activities may, in different ways, affect our offline personal identity [...] [T]he more important online activities become [...] the more we can suspect that any self-narrative [one] would recount would include events that occur within them[...] [O]ur interpretation of ourselves is constitutive of who we are," and thus our "identity will significantly be constituted by[...]online life..." *See* Rodogno, R. (2012). Personal Identity Online. *Philosophy & Technology*. 25(3), p. 325-326.

Thus experiences in virtual worlds, Schechtman argues, might very well constitute a phenomenologically "genuine" and morally powerful part of participants' lives, "as real as any others" (Schechtman, 2012, p. 332). Rather than just offering a transient instance of play for a physically-embodied being in a make-believe virtual environment, *SL* seems to offer a chance to re-conceive and embody oneself differently in ways that count -- and that last -- for the participant psychologically, socially, and morally. "Virtual reality" thus experienced is virtual only in its presentation. Everything else about it *is just our life*, albeit from startlingly different perspectives.[2]

This stronger reading of the realness of virtual embodiment supports the kind of transcendence claim that I am making here by putting significant pressures on the master narratives of what it means to be a body and a self who is female, male, straight, gay, white, nonwhite, able-bodied, disabled, and so on. And this is the case not simply because one can "create" an avatar whose appearance challenges the prescriptions of social master narratives regarding how one ought to act and appear, but because, if one wishes, one is able to enact, and *reify*, a "forbidden," or hidden, self. Or else one might find oneself surrounded by individuals never (or not often) encountered in corporeal life -- including not only imaginary creatures and fantasy characters, but importantly, individuals whose embodied races, abilities, and backgrounds might very well have been on the periphery of one's everyday experiences. In all these ways, I suggest, one transcends one's corporeal self through a narrative engagement with, and within, a virtual world.

So what does transcendence look like in *Second Life*? Pavia, a female avatar, notes that

> ...I'm not the person you have gotten to know. But at the same time I am. I'm a man in real life, but about three weeks ago I learned that I'm transsexual. I've pretty much known that I was different all my life[...]Here in Second Life I created something new in myself that I never realized was there before. At first it was just role playing, but then I grew to love Pavia. I kept infusing myself into her, but then something unexpected started to happen: Pavia started coming out in the

[2]In fact, Nick Yee has argued that while the effects of avatars on participants within virtual worlds have often been explained in terms of the Proteus Effect -- a phenomenon where an individual's virtual in-world identity is dependent on the avatar under which she or he operates -- a deeper investigation suggests that it is in fact the Proteus Paradox which results. The Proteus Paradox suggests that "...where we think we are fully in control, unique psychological levers in virtual worlds (such as our avatars) powerfully change how we think and behave" (in the physical world). *See* Yee, N. (2014). *The Proteus Paradox*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p.5.

> real world. I became her, she became me. (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 138)

Another avatar who was quite shy in the corporeal world, observed that

> I noted yesterday that I had no problem talking to a complete stranger at the shopping center, simply because I have spent a lot of time in SL recently doing the same thing. (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 121)

Participants also experiment with gender fluidity, where corporeal-world males will not only appear as women (and women as men), but as transgendered individuals, individuals of indeterminate gender expression, individuals whose gender expression changes weekly or daily, and so on.

Why does this avatar fluidity matter? Sherry Turkle has noted that this "gender swapping" makes it possible for people to experience, rather than merely observe, what it feels like to be the opposite gender or to have no gender at all (Turkle 1997). Thus, rather than play-acting or imagining *what it might be like* to be otherwise, participants, by placing themselves in the middle of actual, rather than imagined, contexts, are subject to the reactions, behaviors, attitudes, and moral judgments of others: they do not simply imagine what it might be like to be a transsex woman in a bar – in an important sense, they *become* her. A participant notes:

> I haven't been able to spend as much time getting my appearance to be more what I want which would be more androgynous or possible confuseable with a female. Basically what I feel like I would be on the inside if I had my choice would be female but possibly confuseable with male occasionally- more towards the androgynous female side of the spectrum. SL was really important to me because it gave me the chance to actually try out what I would want to look like if I had a chance to sort of express the transgendered feeling as my actual appearance and you know to be able to look like.

> In my first life, if this were a perfect world I'd try and represent more of my personality in the real world. If I did do this it would meet with a lot of criticism, it's easier to pass himself off as a generic guy rather than a girl. In a virtual world, I find myself acting more feminine, I can't represent much of his personality in the real world

> I live in the rural south, and even though I love it here, people are too closed-minded. On SL I can look like RuPaul and nobody cares. I can be, be more like myself. (McKeon and Wyche, 2005)

Thus, this gender fluidity, for all of its playful, often masquerade-like appearance, can be quite profound, allowing the participant not only to see, but to be seen, as a unique and norm-challenging self. But the perspectival changes that *SL* makes possible are not limited to self-expression and perception alone. Indeed, to complicate the picture a bit more, the third-party, often heteronormative participants who, in a non-virtual environment, might assume the sociocultural privilege of judgment—or of outright discrimination -- are limited within *SL* both by circumstances and by prevailing attitudes. For instance, even given the persistent prejudice against LGBTQ communities, what one begins to see in-world is a significant shift in the general narrative competence of the participants -- not necessarily in the sense of becoming more nuanced interpreters of the plight of others, but in the sense of acquiring an openness, learned through numerous narrative interactions in *SL,* to the possibility of the wrongness of their beliefs.

How this takes place varies. Generally, because a not insignificant number of participants assume non-heteronormative identities, whether to express their more authentic selves or else to experiment in a kind of world-traveling that is not (safely) available within the physical environment, heteronormativity, and the related oppressions of all those who are "other," becomes among some the exception, rather than the rule (Lugones, 1989). Indeed, not only are participants free to engage in what they take to be expressions of their genuine (or experimental) selves, those who previously assumed the relative acceptance within the corporeal world of their explicit and implicit oppression of others face numerous, and challenging, counter-narratives within *SL*'s environments. In fact, discrimination and acceptance often switch places, with the former relegated to the background, while the latter assumes the foreground, peopled with an increasingly diverse looking, sounding, and acting set of avatars whose presence attests to the power of these virtually-embodied narratives of inclusion.

The widening of the boundaries of normative embodiment within virtual worlds is also quite significant for individuals who are otherwise limited by a corporeal sociopolitical environment that too often refuses to accommodate differences. In the case of non-neurotypical participants, Boellstorff observes that

> Second Life's reliance on textual chat instead of voice during the period of my fieldwork, the limited capacity for avatar facial expression, and a general tolerance for delayed or unexpected responses...made it possible for many

> residents with autism to be competent social actors to a significantly greater degree than in the actual world. Even residents with what were typically seen to be more minor psychological disabilities, like Attention Deficit Disorder, often found that Second Life enabled new forms of selfhood...in Second Life they were perceived like any other resident...In cases of severe psychological disability, Second Life could enable significantly new forms of selfhood...Joseph...suffered from debilitation schizophrenia...in the actual world Joseph "is a recluse and rarely communicates." But in Second Life "Joseph...explore(s) places for hours, spend(s) time talking, create(s) things. It is amazing to watch him do thing in here that he could never do in RL. For instance, in RL he lives with [his] mother for obvious reasons. Soon after he came into SL, Joseph put a cabin on a piece of land and decorated it with a few small items...[H]e said "This must be what it feels like to move into a college dorm for the first time." (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 147-148)

Moreover, those with physical disabilities find within *Second Life* a unique kind of embodied freedom: Disabled residents of *SL*, no matter how they represent themselves in-world, can walk, run, swim, and even fly. As some participants have noted, they are able to not be "body bound," and engage in the kinds of movement, connection, and communication that they take to be more authentically their own (Boellstorff, 2008). In other words, what virtual embodiment offers is exactly what these participants could not experience in their corporeal existence: to be otherwise, to transcend the limitations of a society that still has not sufficiently embraced accessibility as a moral norm, and to offer counter-narratives about what it means to be a (dis)abled self, challenging the dominant master narratives about what disabled individuals can do, and what they can be (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 137). I suggest that in so doing, they become more fully, more completely, themselves.

Because of my emphasis on the transformative effects of *SL*, it is important to distinguish the claim that the (dis)abled can become more fully themselves within *SL*'s virtual worlds from the claim that *SL* is a kind of an enhancement technology -- a super-prosthetic of sorts. While enhancements, whether physical or intellectual, are designed to be a means to be "better than" -- to be a means of transcendence of our physical and psychological limitations -- the sort of transcendence I have in mind here is not one of overcoming the human. Indeed, it is in an important way quite the opposite: It is the embracing of the expansion our experience and understanding of the normatively human -- the self that is more fully *me*,

rather than the superhuman *better-than-me*. What is more, it is about becoming visible to oneself and to others as someone with an identity that is more complex and richer than could ever have been imagined – one is revealed as a multifaceted, rather than merely enhanced, moral agent.

Moreover, my claim about the possibilities for disabled individuals within virtual worlds has less to do with the broad discursive spaces that *Second Life* makes possible, and more with its normalization of the disabled body as an actively agential one. After all, if all *SL* provided was the opportunity for a disabled individual to "fly" via his or her avatar -- and even if the individual did in fact view the experience as liberating – it is unclear at best how the predominant master narratives of the "badness" of disability might be in this way challenged. In fact, they might arguably be reinforced: *SL* would merely represent a momentary escape from an ostensibly undesirable (and fixed) identity of being less-than. Instead, something very different is possible: disabled individuals can choose to create a disabled avatar, and, because this avatar neither experiences any corporeal accessibility issues nor need appear non-disabled to avoid such experiences in-world, he or she can subsequently become a part of any community or environment, at the same time normalizing the presence of disabled bodies in able-bodied-favoring locations or environments. The disabled participant is not merely integrated into a robustly diverse online community, but also, through the practices of avatar-making and engagement, enacts an identity – tells a story -- that directly challenges damaging presuppositions not only about ability and access, but about the notions of disability itself.

3. A Few (Serious) Worries

Of course, *Second Life*, and other virtual worlds, are not without serious concerns. Specifically, worries about how the actual behavior of a worrying number of participants suggests not liberation, but a furthering of stereotypes -- less a transcendence of worldly limitations, and more a replication of old, persisting hatreds, prejudices, and fears. The more obvious examples are the choices of the avatar embodiments themselves – young, mostly white, thin or muscular, able-bodied, often (especially in the case of female avatars) skimpily dressed reflections of the media-created ideals.

One participant describes his SL avatar by noting

> He has blonde hair, he's like your stereotypical gay guy, like the whole six-pack abs and stuff, he's basically what everybody wants to look like in our

> community. He wears mainly dark clothing, he's outspoken, however he knows when he needs to shut up. I designed him this way because, in a way, its what I hoped to look like in first life.
>
> Most guys just like wearing jeans and a t-shirt, something that shows off their muscle bodies, because they don't have those in real life but they got them in here.
>
> She looks likes she is in her twenties, but 90% of the women I know are in their 40's but all of our avvies look so young, so nice. (McKeon and Wyche, 2005)

In my own, albeit anecdotal, experiences, I have often been asked by other avatars why I (as a female avatar) choose to dress in such a "boring" way -- black jeans, t-shirt, black jacket, fairly flat shoes. I was often offered free outfits that would make me more "exciting" or "attractive," or "fun" – mostly micro-mini skirts, bustiers, ridiculously high heels, see-through outfits, and so on. When I politely refused the offered "appearances," some participants remarked that I was missing the point of *Second Life* – to be the ideal version of oneself, the version that would, finally, erase one's imperfections, flaws, and other "real life" limitations.

Indeed, a

> significant numbers of participants that present as female in-world [r]egarded their bust size as a primary concern when creating a Second Life avatar. 'At first I played with an avatar that I thought represented me physically....But not many people talked to me. Now [with a large-chested avatar] people go out of their way to IM me and send me friend requests.' (Burns, 2009)

In fact, in one study of gender representation within *Second Life*, four out of five women interviewed claimed that while an avatar represented their desired appearance or personality, "what was especially striking is how many women, when prompted, said their avatars were "better" than their real selves. Not just skinnier or sexier, but better" (*Ibid.*). The researchers note that

> countless Second Life residents are so enveloped in a popular definition of "attractive" that they need no coercion to create a sexually idealized character. In fact, the creation of the sexually-idealized character at the expense of a character more in line with many players' tastes is mostly deemed necessary for making friends. (*Ibid.*)

What these accounts seem to suggest is that it would not be altogether unreasonable to view the virtual world's influences on gender representations

and gender politics as a revenge effect of a technology that once held the promise of extending, rather than shrink-wrapping, our notions of embodied identity (Tenner, 1996). After all, a virtual world that allows, indeed encourages, the extremes might very well blithely look past exploitative gender-based master narratives in favor of yet another technological enhancement. And if the largely male-dominated virtual worlds facilitate opportunities for the idealization and fetishization of certain physical traits while marketing these experiences as truly novel, liberating ones, then perhaps we ought not be too surprised when, once we move beyond the novelty of technological trappings, we find high-tech versions of the same oppressive narratives of beauty, desirability, and perfection. In part, this might very well be due to the newness of the technology itself, and the often slow pace at which we adapt to its unprecedented freedoms. Yet the worry is that these technologies, regardless of the length of our exposure to them, will simply further habituate us to the oppressive norms of gendered embodiments – except this time, under the banner of the "freedoms" of the virtual. And thus instead of opening up new possibilities for transcending corporeal limitations and challenging narratives of oppression, our virtual lives will merely offer us yet another way to damage ourselves and each other.

Finally, I turn to perhaps the most troubling issue within *Second Life* -- that of race. Of course, while the subject of race within virtual worlds very much deserves its own treatment, here, I will just note a few particularly disturbing trends and tendencies.

Although the promise of greater racial variability and acceptance is something toward which a number of *Second Life* participants strive, generally speaking, a large number of avatars tend toward white, or at least light-skinned, embodiments. In fact, as Boellstorff noted

> some residents who tried wearing nonwhite skins reported racist responses, including friends who stopped answering ims and statements that nonwhite persons were invading Second Life. It is not surprising that some residents who were nonwhite in the actual world engaged in forms of racial passing, so that at least one of their avatar embodiments was white. (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 145)

Thus, out of the many kinds of racisms on display in online environments (anything from casual racist remarks, to voice-based racism, focusing on how someone "sounds," to racism based on how "ethnic" avatar handles or actual names appear), *Second Life*, as a highly visual environment, often becomes a stage for the most common of all prejudices -- one based on simple appearance,

or, in *SL* parlance, on one's "skin." And this is when things become complicated: On the one hand, the freedoms offered by *SL* allow the participants to experience themselves, and to be experienced by others, as new and often challenging identities. Yet on the other, we face two significant moral worries about the consequences of these freedoms as it concerns matters of race.

First, we are faced with the worry about unintended consequences of implicit racism associated with a hardening of group privilege. As Lisa Nakamura argues, participants in virtual worlds who appear as different races, genders, and so on engage in what she calls "identity tourism" -- a kind of a noncommittal, nonthreatening journeying of the already normatively-privileged through the experience of being a non-privileged "other." Indeed, noting the fetishization of Asian characters as an example of just such "tourism", she suggests that

> players who choose to perform this type of racial play are almost always white, and their appropriation of stereotyped male Asiatic samurai figures allows them to indulge in a dream of crossing over racial boundaries temporarily and recreationally...Tourism is a particularly apt metaphor to describe the activity of racial identity appropriation, or "passing" in cyberspace. The activity of "surfing," (an activity already associated with tourism in the mind of most Americans) the Internet not only reinforces the idea that cyberspace is not only a place where travel and mobility are featured attractions, but also figures it as a form of travel which is inherently recreational, exotic, and exciting, like surfing...[I]dentity tourism...allows a player to appropriate an Asian racial identity without any of the risks associated with being a racial minority in real life. (Nakamura, 2000)

Thus, what is often missing from such an experience are the actual consequences of being non-white -- or gay, female, disabled, and so on. One simply tastes, but does not inhabit, the identities that too often come with a social, emotional, economic, and political price. And because one does not have to pay this price -- because one can simply slip in and out of one's "skin" and retreat to the safety of maleness, whiteness, heteronormativity -- the act of trying out other identities like so many pairs of shoes threatens to do very little, if anything at all, for either deepening or broadening one's moral universe or enhancing one's capacity to engage in more inclusive practices of moral understandings. In so many ways, one might say that it underscores the in-

group privilege by treating the out-group's identities as merely so much costuming and make-up.

Second, there is, unsurprisingly, the worry about the persistence of explicit, outright racism within virtual worlds. One well-known incident involved Erika Thereian, an *SL* member "trying on" the skin of a photorealistic African-American female as a favor to a friend who created such "skins" in-world. Thereian, ordinarily presenting herself as a buxom blonde, recalled that once she teleported into a region, "...a couple people [are] standing around. One said, 'Look at the n***** b****.' Another said 'Great, they are gonna invade *SL* now.' [...]" (Au, 2008, p. 72-74). In fact, As Wagner James Au notes, such a reaction is not at all rare, and a number of African-American *SL* participants who wish to represent themselves as close to their physical-world appearance as possible, engage in "virtual skin lightening," choosing a skin that "passes" for "Latino/a" (rather than black) as a way to lessen the effects of obvious, as well as more subtle, discrimination (Au, 2008; Peterson, 2011). But we ought not be surprised, Nakamura suggests, for

> [r]ace doesn't happen because of biology; it happens because of culture. Race (and racism) is something that develops when our culture rewards the persecution of a smaller group. Unfortunately, it seems that as our lives move more and more into the digital world, we are migrating more and more of the racism in our culture along with us. (Peterson, 2011)

Thus, it seems that even given the new agency-making potentialities of *Second Life,* many are still bound by an enactment of the same agency-denying and identity-limiting stories. The master narratives about darker skin, sexual appeal, and gender normativity seem to have found another home in the virtual world, protected by the anonymity of an avatar, and thus often uncoupled from the possibility of public shame. And so it seems that in too many cases, our avatars neither extend nor transcend, but merely reflect, albeit with an ability to fly. It is my hope that with time, virtual embodiment will not only be recognized as a fruitful subject of theory, but will become the kind of moral and sociopolitical laboratory that allows us to learn more carefully, to communicate more openly, and to engage more fearlessly through a narrative process that broadens and deepens our identities, and those of others.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that if one begins with the assumption that personal identities are both embodied and narratively constituted, the kinds of stories told through virtual embodiments within virtual spaces ought to be taken seriously by moral theorists. Within these virtual worlds, individuals just might be able to claim the kind of authorship of their stories that goes a long way toward challenging longstanding, and damaging, master narratives. They may be able to explore otherness in ways that are de-othering, or they might find more nuanced, less privileged understandings of what it might be like to be otherwise.

These are, of course, all good, important reasons to include the virtual in our understanding of the personal and the moral. And yet, just as I have some worries about the continued damage of stereotype entrenchment and other limitations of virtual embodiment, I am even more concerned about something that at first seems rather abstract and removed from the more immediate concerns about embodied identities. Specifically, I wonder if the invitation to such a great level of control over one's virtual embodiment that the *SL* universe offers leaves users with a false, and perhaps harmful, sense of autonomy and authorship: Embodiment, it tells them, is whatever you want it to be, as is the environment that surrounds you. If the only limitations (outside the few set by Linden Lab) are ones born of one's imagination, the message seems clear: *your personal identity is, fundamentally, your choice.*

If we allow, even for the sake of argument, that virtual identity and its narratives are as powerful an influence as I have suggested they might be on one's overall sense of self, then can it not also be said that in their libertarian emphasis on total agential freedom, they *unhelpfully* contribute to the mythology of total control over who, what, where, and how we are? And might we then not extend this mythology outward, declaring everyone else to be similarly masters of their fate? If we grant this possibility, we face a dilemma: On the one hand, virtual embodiment is indeed a welcome chance to be otherwise; on the other, it is also an environment largely focused on, and experienced through, total authorial control. Put more simply, the freedoms and creative possibilities of the virtual world might allow us to forget that who we are has just as much to do with circumstances, situatedness, or chance as it does with choice -- and perhaps more. And while this movement away from contingency and contextuality and toward unfettered agency might seem like

an empowering possibility, in the end, we ought not lose sight of its dangers. I fear that by embracing such agential control in the virtual world, we may lose sight not only of how communally, relationally, and often accidentally identities are created, but also of the thought that it is a *good thing* that they are. Thus, with the growth and expansion of virtual worlds, it seems that we ought to take seriously not only their power to re-define personal identities, but also note an emerging master narrative about the self as a monological playground of limitless possibilities in our lives, second or otherwise.

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