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Identity Theory: A Literature Review

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Literature Review

In order to examine my initial question regarding how “real-life” factors contribute to the crafting of an identity in a virtual world, it is important to consider how identity is crafted in the “real” world and the phases a “normal” individual completes in this developmental process. This includes not only consideration of how individual identity is created, but also the influence of community and culture in forming our personal sense of self. Once we understand how a personal and social identity is developed, we can better grasp the migration of identity from real to virtual realms and the interplay between the two environments. At the same time we will investigate my second research query about how subject-object dynamics impact our sense of embeddedness (also called embodiment or immersion) in a virtual identity and how we can “embody” our virtual selves and ultimately impact our real-life identity as a result. While a thorough discussion of identity would include the period from birth through death, it is not my purpose to dissect what happens in infancy, present myself as an authority on early childhood development, or to bring Freud’s Oedipus (discourse on primal sexual urges beginning in early childhood) to center stage. Aside from a brief overview of this early development, our discussion will center on identity formation once an individual begins formal schooling (approximately age 6) and conclude at middle adulthood (approximately age sixty-five).

Erikson and Psychosocial Development

The first framework I have chosen with which to illustrate this journey to maturity is from the work of psychosocial development researcher Erik Erikson (1968). According to the website of Erikson’s colleague Eric Berne

(http://www.ericberne.com/people/erik_erikson.htm), Erikson has been credited with the term “identity crisis,” possibly because of his extensive research in how identity is developed over an individual’s entire lifespan, or perhaps because of Erikson’s own identity conflict as a Norwegian male (paternal) raised as a Jew (maternal). While this study will focus in more depth on those stages that occur once an individual reaches adolescence and young adulthood, Erikson separates the progression through time in the development of a vital personality into eight distinct phases (see figure 1):

Erikson’s Stages Of Psychosocial Development	
<i>Approximate attained age</i>	<i>Phase</i>
Infancy (birth to 18 months)	Phase 1: Temporal Perspective (in healthy development) vs. Time Confusion (unhealthy development).
Early Childhood (2 to 3 years)	Phase 2: Self-certainty (self esteem) vs. Self-consciousness (appearance in the eyes of others).
Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Phase 3: Role Experimentation vs. Role Fixation.
School Age (6 to 11 years)	Phase 4: Apprenticeship vs. Work Paralysis.
Adolescence (12 to 18 years)	Phase 5: Identity vs. Identity Confusion.
Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years)	Phase 6: Intimacy vs. Isolation.
Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years)	Phase 7: Generativity vs. Stagnation.
Maturity (65 to death)	Phase 8: Integrity vs. Despair.

Figure 1. The Eight-Stage Model, from *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. Erikson (1968).

Kegan and Subject-Object Evolution

During this process of identity development an individual should also be able to progress from being consumed with their own existence (self as subject), to the realization they are part of a much larger, separate (global) system (self as object). One expects a baby to be focused on having its immediate needs met and a toddler to see all toys as ‘mine’ (second-order consciousness) but by the time this same person reaches adulthood, it is expected they have learned to take the needs of others into consideration, realize others may have opinions that are different from their own, and be able to engage in intimate relationships (third-order consciousness). Kegan (1994) translates the demands that modern life makes on us, our relationships, our ability to resolve conflict, and the successful mastery of our own life journey into successive levels of development (with competence in one level being necessary before advancement to the next). He describes indicators of this development as increasing orders of conscious ability (see figure 2; key points in bold—emphasis mine):

The Evolving Self			
	Independent Elements <i>(First-order conscious ability)</i>	Durable Category <i>(Second-order conscious ability)</i>	Cross Categorical Knowing <i>(Third-order conscious ability)</i>
Logical-Cognitive	<i>Can:</i> Recognize that objects exist independent of own sensing of them. <i>Cannot:</i> Distinguish own perception of an object from the actual properties of the object	<i>Can:</i> Grant to objects their own properties irrespective of one’s perceptions; can construct a narrative sequence and timeline. <i>Cannot:</i> Reason abstractly, discern overall patterns, form hypotheses.	<i>Can:</i> Reason abstractly; form negative classes; see relationships as simultaneously reciprocal. <i>Cannot:</i> Systematically produce all possible combinations of relations; test hypotheses.
Social-Cognitive	<i>Can:</i> Recognize that persons exist separate from oneself. <i>Cannot:</i> Recognize that other	<i>Can:</i> Construct own point of view and grant others their distinct point of view; role-play; manipulate	<i>Can:</i> Be aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations that take primacy over individual interests.

	persons have their own purposes and viewpoint independent of oneself.	others on behalf of own goals. <i>Cannot:</i> Take own point of view and another's simultaneously; maintain interpersonal relationships.	<i>Cannot:</i> Construct a generalized system regulative of interpersonal relationships and relationships between relationships.
Intrapersonal-Affective	<i>Can:</i> Distinguish between inner sensation and outside stimulation. <i>Cannot:</i> Distinguish one's impulses from oneself; that is, is embedded in or driven by one's impulses.	<i>Can:</i> Drive, regulate, or organize impulses to produce enduring dispositions and identify qualities of self (identity formation). <i>Cannot:</i> Internally coordinate more than one point of view; distinguish one's need from oneself; identify enduring qualities of the self according to inner psychological manifestations.	<i>Can:</i> Internalize another's point of view in what becomes the co-construction of personal experience, enabling deep relationships. <i>Cannot:</i> Organize own states or internal parts of self into systematic whole; distinguish self from one's relationship; see the self as the author of one's inner psychological life.

Figure 1: Three Principles of Meaning Organization, from *In Over Our Heads*, Kegan (1994).

In reference to the evolving self, Kegan says:

“The different principles of mental organization are intimately related to each other. They are not just different ways of knowing, each with its preferred season. One does not simply replace the other, nor is the relation merely additive or cumulative, an accretion of skills. Rather, the relation is transformative, qualitative, and incorporative. Each successive principle subsumes or encompasses the prior principle. *That which was a subject becomes the object to the next principle.* The new principle is a higher order principle (more complex, more inclusive) that makes the prior principle into an element or tool of its system.” (Kegan, 1994, p. 33)

This subject-object transformation occurs all through formative life and roughly aligns with several corresponding stages of Erikson’s work (see figure 2):

Overlapping Frameworks of Erikson and Kegan		
<i>Approximate attained age</i>	<i>Erikson</i>	<i>Kegan</i>
Early Childhood (2 to 3 years)	Phase 2: Self-certainty (self esteem) vs. Self-consciousness (appearance in the eyes of others).	Impulsive – Underlying Structure: Subject-Impulses, Perceptions; Object-Reflexes-Sensing, Moving
Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Phase 3: Role Experimentation vs. Role Fixation.	Imperial – Underlying Structure: Subject-Needs, Interests, Wishes; Object-Impulse, Perceptions
School Age (6 to 11 years)	Phase 4: Apprenticeship vs. Work Paralysis.	Interpersonal – Underlying Structure: Subject-The Interpersonal, Mutuality; Object-Needs, Interests, wishes
Adolescence (12 to 18 years)	Phase 5: Identity vs. Identity Confusion.	Institutional – Underlying Structure: Subject – Authorship, Identity, Physic Administration, Idealology; Object-The Interpersonal, Mutuality

Figure 2. Subject-Object Comparison from The Evolving Self. Kegan (1982).

Together these two frameworks help to illustrate how one develops an individual sense of value, an identity within a local sociocultural context, and a viewpoint of self as one part of a larger global system.

Psychosocial Development in the Physical World

“A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.”

- Anthony Giddens

The Earliest Phases (Birth to Approximately Age Five)

Our very first moments belong to our central nervous system. This biological system is a seat of activity, with the ability to send impulses to any number of muscle groups in an effort to carry out the activities of daily living. Aside from the involuntary acts necessary to sustain life (respiratory functions, etc.), the central nervous system responds to commands from our brains to carry out any number of movements.

George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) both worked in this foundational area of research. Mead (1934) studied how the mind can cause us to simply mimic a gesture in response to a similar gesture (think of someone who has never experienced the waving of a hand in greeting) as a simple biological act, without attaching any meaning to it. Over time, a relationship between the brain and the central nervous system may begin to form, depending on the gesture. In this manner, the gesture becomes more of a referential symbol, depending on the circumstance.

Vygotsky (1978) also looked at these biological acts of mimicry, particularly as it applied to young children in their early stages of development. In their earliest stages, children are only capable of mimicking what they see others do, without attaching any meaning to the gesture. According to both Mead and Vygotsky, it is when meaning is attached to the gestures (particularly through the use of language as a tool), that they become useful in building a sense of self. Erikson (1968) states it is in this early segment

of existence when a young person begins to assign meaning to the world around them.

Mead (1925) says that the assignment of meaning ties consciousness with behavior.

Kegan (1982) describes this phase of development as “me centered” (first order conscious ability). It is a time where children are primarily concerned with having their immediate needs met – they are embedded in their perceptions--but at the same time developing the deliberate, independent movements that are the foundation of personal gestures. Kegan (1982) states, “The zone of mediation where meaning is made is variously called by personality psychologists the ‘ego,’ the ‘self,’ the person” (p. 3).

Dewey (2002) suggests this early preoccupation with self is when our fundamental habits are formed. It is also a period of self-exploration in the development of autonomy from one’s structure through early communication.

Vygotsky (1978) stresses the importance of language as a mediator by stating, “The most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously independent lines of development, converge” (p. 24). With language comes the intelligence to weigh problems of present behavior with future consequences, involving both memory and foresight (Mead, 1934). Piaget (2008) states:

With the acquisition of language and symbolic play, mental imagery, etc., that is, the formation of the symbolic function (or, in a general sense, the semiotic function), actions are interiorized and become representations; this supposes a reconstruction and reorganization on the new plane of representative thought. (p. 41)

Through the use of language and meaning making the healthy toddler will develop gradual autonomy from his parents. Because this “weaning” typically happens at an early age (and is self-directed), an interruption in this process (or entering this phase prematurely) might cause long-term effects in the formation of a healthy sense of self-worth. Kegan (1982) describes this time period as a movement from the child as the center of his own universe (subject), to one of being an object, or a player in a larger production (pre-school class, children on a playground, or one member of a larger family).

Most of us are birthed into some cultural association, whether ethnic, political or social (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995). These associations have a defined set of accepted behaviors and actions, which create the defining characteristics of the group (Dewey, 2002). Our individual identity can be compared to the normative behaviors of the group through the process of feedback and self-verification. Stryker, Owens, and White (2000) assert that identity and ethnicity are equivalent, and consist of “The ready-made set of endowments and identifications that every individual shares with others from the moment of birth by the chance of the family into which he is born at that given time in a given place” (pp. 22-23). What if, for some reason, a child’s early role-experimentation (which would be considered normal at this stage) doesn’t conform to the defining characteristics of the group to which they belong? The child has to choose to either conform to the role chosen for him (suppressing the role of his own choosing), or rebel. Dewey (2002) writes, “The badness of good people, for the most part only recorded in fiction, is the revenge taken by human nature for the injuries heaped on it in the name of morality” (p. 4). Kegan (1982) states, “A central conviction is that personality development occurs in

the context of interactions between the organism and the environment, rather than through the internal processes of maturation alone.”

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) suggests that even at this young age, cultural and societal norms are guided by habitus—the environmental conditions under which one exists including rules, behaviors, and social customs. While our habitus doesn't constrain us to a pre-determined set of actions, it organizes the way we see the world. Bourdieu (1978) gives an example of these cultural norms in the choice of sports activities by a particular social class. He asserts that people who are considered more cultured and refined (upper classes) prefer sports such as golf and polo (less barbarian), while more working class populations seem to prefer contact sports such as American football. Even in play, our roles are influenced by context.

School Age (Six to Approximately Age Eleven)

By the time a child reaches school age, they will either develop the skills and the ability to use the technology and tools of their time, or they will develop a deep sense of inadequacy in their own gifts and talents, given the immediate social environment Erikson (1980). This is not, according to Erikson, a time of accomplishments in the pursuit of play, as much as it is in achieving a “token sense of participation in the real world of adults” (p. 88). At what age did most of us get to mow the lawn for the first time? In today's world, this immediate social environment may be largely technical; Research by Nardi (1996) into human-computer interaction reveals:

First, there is a shift of focus between the user and the computer to a larger context of interaction of human beings with their environment, that is, transcending the user interface to reality beyond the ‘human-computer system’.

The user begins as a novice and often ends up an expert. The current meaning of the word *user* now includes not only individuals but also groups and organizations. (p. 47)

In the literal sense this can be an indicator of class struggle, where family income can predispose one child toward productive advancement and another toward inferiority. Kegan (1982) describes this phase as one of the Interpersonal – where the underlying structure is one of gaining feedback from others and of the resulting self-verification (subjective), while being aware of the same needs in others (objective), representing a transition to second-order thinking; these processes will continue through adolescence. Increasingly, these interpersonal transactions are through electronic means, as “human beings usually use computers not because they want to interact with them but they want to reach their goals beyond the situation of the ‘dialogue’ with the computer” (Nardi, 1996, p.49). As we obtain feedback from others through interaction, that feedback will either verify the self-perception (self-worth) we have of ourselves based on our tools and the meanings we have attached to them as well as our memory of previous interactions, or it will refute how we see ourselves in terms of our self-efficacy, or the ability to manage our environment (Tafarodi and Swann Jr, 1995). The use of these tools, also considered resources, are constantly in motion and positive feedback will cause people feel good and competent about themselves and continue the activities that verify a favorable self-worth (Stets and Cast, 2007). It would be no surprise to discover, we tend to gravitate toward people who affirm our self-identity. This is fundamental feature of social interaction (Swann, Stein-Seroussi, and Giesler, 1992).

Interestingly enough, self-verification also seems to be valid when the self-perception is *negative*. The research of Swann and others indicates that while most of us can understand gravitating toward people who affirm our positive self-worth, the opposite also seems true. His work supports the hypothesis that if we have a negative self-perception, we tend to seek out interactions with those people who will affirm that perception (Swann, Stein-Seroussi and Giesler, 1992, Hixon, and Swann, 1993).

Self-verification is constantly in motion and our self-value is highly impacted by (a) the amount of feedback we receive from others, and (b) the value placed on the source of the feedback (Burke, 1991). When this support is lacking or has been abruptly discontinued (for example, through the death of a person whose feedback we attach value to), the resulting negative feelings can be one of the primary markers of depression (Tafarodi and Swann, 1995). Our self-verification is constantly in motion and research proposes that over time, our self-perception actually changes to align with the feedback we receive (Burke, 2006).

Adolescence (Twelve to Approximately Age Eighteen)

It should be no surprise that adolescence is typically viewed as a time of turmoil, particularly if the phases leading up to this have been less than ideal. Erikson (1980) says this stage is the “bridge” between early childhood and later stages, where social roles become “increasingly coercive.” Parental support and acceptance in this phase are highly significant in the development of health self-regard (Tafarodi and Swann, 1995). Typical characteristics of this phase are:

- task identification vs. sense of futility;
- anticipation of roles vs. role inhibition;

- will to be oneself vs. self-doubt; and
- mutual recognition vs. autistic isolation (Erikson, 1968, p. 94).

This phase is also marked by “trying on” roles--what Erikson (1956) calls the “moratorium” phase—one of role experimentation without regard to consequence. Recall an entire generation of American “baby-boomers” reaching this phase in the late 1960’s. Kegan (1982) agrees in principle, calling this a time of reassessment, renewal and caring for ones soul. Objectively, Kegan calls this is a time of mutuality--becoming a member of a community and respecting a common set of values (choosing a habitus as opposed to being birthed into one). Piaget (2008) says:

From the social point of view, there is also an important conquest. Firstly, hypothetical reasoning changes the nature of discussions: a fruitful and constructive discussion means that by using hypotheses we can adopt the point of view of the adversary (although not necessarily believing it) and draw the logical consequences it implies. (p. 42)

Research by Burke and others into the subject of identity reveals that each of us may have several role-based identities that interplay with each other at any one time. Each of these identities subscribes to a different set of rules, depending on the group they associate with. For example, many of us hold multiple identities as a parent, a spouse, a child, a professional in a particular discipline, member of a church, etc. Each of these identities has a set of normative behaviors that acts as a standard for membership in that group (Burke, 2006). In this case, each identity is verified by matching the self-perception of that identity to the identity standard. When there is congruence (salience), there is positive emotion. A lack of identity verification registers negative emotion (Stets, 2005).

How well our multiple identities exist together in harmony is an indicator of salience.

Identities that have common underlying frames of reference have high salience and conversely, identities that don't share common meaning in the performance of their roles have low salience (Burke and Reitzes, 1981; Stets and Burke, 2000). Low salience can be associated with identity crisis, or stress. Burke (1991) states that, "Stress is a relationship between external conditions and the current state of the person; and distress, or anxiety is the internal, subjective response to that relationship" (p. 836). According to Burke, distress is the interruption of the identity process where we compare our self-perceptions to the identity standard. Interestingly, distress is also observed when feedback is *more* positive than a person's self-perception.

Young Adulthood (Nineteen to Approximately Age 40)

Erikson (1980) suggests that psychosocial intimacy is not possible without a firm sense of identity, where the ratio of masculinity and femininity is proportional to the identity being developed. He states, "The youth who is not sure of his identity shies away from interpersonal intimacy; but the surer he becomes of himself, the more he seeks it in the form of friendship, combat, leadership, love and inspiration" (p. 101). This echoes Kegan's (1982) view of subjective self-identity giving way to objective participation in an intimate relationship and a movement to third-order processes. He asserts, "Growth always involves a process of differentiation, of emergence from embeddedness" (Kegan, 1982, p. 31). By this stage of life, Kegan assumes an individual can compromise to gain agreement, can exist successfully in close relationships with others, and can execute the reciprocity necessary to make that happen. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge what Kegan assumes an individual who dwells in a third-order

consciousness *cannot* do: Consistently see the larger picture from a theoretical viewpoint, maintain a balance between interpersonal relationships and those that are impersonal (relationships between relationships), and the ability to separate oneself as a psychological entity distinct from one's relationships.

Middle Adulthood (40 to Approximately Age 65)

According to Erikson, in this phase an individual concerns himself with raising a family. Where this is not possible, there can be regression and an obsessive need for pseudo-intimacy, often with a sense of stagnation, boredom, and personal impoverishment, where individuals indulge themselves as if they were their own children (otherwise known as mid-life crisis). Interactions in this phase are usually channeled through the structures that underlie social life (activities based on roles), and can offer an explanation of the choices a person might make in situations where they have the possibility of enacting alternative role-related actions (Stryker, 2007). These structured interactions (according to Stryker) are able to impact personal identity and meaning by providing the same feedback and self-verification that began when the individual first entered formal schooling. He says, "Commitment impacts identity salience and psychological centrality, and these impact role-choice behavior" (p. 1091). Regarding the resources one brings to this interaction, Stets and Cast (2007) state, "The value of the resources (*in interaction*) lies in what an actor who controls the resource can gain from exchanging it and what an actor who receives it can benefit from it" (p.518). They go on to say "...the verification of one's identity is an important dynamic in interaction, and those who feel good and competent about themselves will be more likely to achieve verification because they will continue their efforts to work toward this goal even when

they periodically fail” (p.520). Kegan (1982) calls the maturation process a time of rebalancing, with the roles of subject and object recast with each revision. He says, “I am not my perceptions; rather I *have* perceptions; my perceptions become the object of my attention, coordinated by what is the new subject of my attention” (p. 32). Dewey (2002) has a somewhat different view:

What psychologists have laboriously treated under the caption of association of ideas has little to do with the ideas and everything to do with the influence of habit upon recollection and perception. A habit - a routine habit - when interfered with generates uneasiness, sets up a protest in favor of restoration and a sense of need of some expiatory act, or else it goes off in casual reminiscence. (p. 75)

This will become clearer as we discuss how these viewpoints are applied to virtual worlds.

Maturity (After Age Sixty-Five)

This final phase is where a person has (typically) matured into an acceptance of their place and role in society. It is a time of Ideological commitment versus the confusion of values where one despairs because there isn't enough time to start over with a new frame of life (Erikson, 1980). Kegan (1982) sees this time of life as a move to Fourth-Order Conscious (and even beyond), where the individual moves from a sense of embeddedness to a sense of balance, authoring a new sense of self, self-dependence, and self-ownership. Events may happen, but they don't define the individual. It is a degree of separation from the internalization from earlier orders of consciousness.

Virtual Identity Through The Erikson-Kegan Lens

“A MUD (multi user domain) can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity.”

- Sherry Turkle

As we will discover, the crafting of a virtual lifestyle and the ability to mature from a subject to an object orientation follows much of the same progression as in a physical world. With the ability to migrate across global boundaries, remain anonymous (if that is one's choice), and create any number of alternate identities, building a individual and social sense of self in a virtual space can initiate a period of self-discovery, risk-taking, and playful enjoyment that is different from “ordinary” life (Huizinga, 1970). Holland, Fox, and Daro (2008) consider a virtual environment such as Second Life a “figured world”—a “socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 101). Who we become in a virtual world however, is still influenced by the “cultural footprint” we bring from our real world—our traditions, habits and values. Hatano and Wertsch (2001) remind us “sense making must rely on people's prior knowledge, much of which is provided by culture” (p. 80). Corneliussen and Walker Rettberg (2008) state, “A digital culture is like every culture, constructed according to norms, rules and traditions” (p. 3). As a virtual social network (as opposed to a “game”), Second Life fosters the iterative development of any number of roles, each with the possibility of a unique persona participating in any number of social situations.

Self Consciousness – Erikson's Early Childhood Phase

“The fundamental, critical, absolutely core point of virtual worlds such as those found in multi-player online games is the development of the player’s identity.”

- Richard Bartle

Just as the early stages of physical psychosocial development evolve through the development self-esteem and mimicking others to create personal meaning, so do the beginnings of a virtual identity. In Second Life, for example, one has a large amount of latitude in everything from their name to the appearance of their avatar. In some ways, it is a “do over” for people who see their online persona as “virtually there” (Boellstorff, 2008). The name one chooses for their avatar is paramount in creating a first impression, causing participants to think as carefully about their name as they do their appearance (once a name is assigned to a particular avatar, it cannot be changed). If a participant isn’t happy with their appearance in the physical world, a virtual world is the place where they can eliminate any physical “flaws” they consider barriers in real life. What’s more, this physical appearance can be altered at any time. This new look can be saved as a file and completely alternate personas (even non-human) can be swapped like clothing (Turkle, 1995). MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2008) offer, “Avatar appearance is one of the only ways a player can lastingly affect their environment, and is an obvious representation of self in the game” (p. 230). The more rich the media experience (and bandwidth) the greater the ability to create a “social presence” though clothing, jewelry, hair and other body accouterments (Nardi, 2005).

Turkle (1995) suggests, “Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated” (p. 180). These experiences with variation (and possibly self-contradiction) are what Gergen

(1991) considers the preliminary effects of social saturation. He suggests, “It is this process of self-population (the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being) that begins to undermine the traditional commitments to both romanticist and modernist forms of being” (p. 69). Smith (1998) states, “The way we see ourselves is at the core of it all...all learning pivots on who we think we are, and who we see ourselves as capable of becoming” (p. 11). Boellstorff (2008) suggests, “Because concepts of personhood shape ideas of agency, desire, and possession, they have enormous consequences for what it means to be virtually human” (p.118). Boudreau (2008) builds on that thought by claiming, “By adding the complication of the avatar, through which all interactions in MMOGs (massively multiplayer online games) occur, the question of who’s identity we are talking about becomes blurred as player and avatar serve each other in the process of creating identity” (p. 86).

Role Experimentation – Erickson’s Preschool Phase

“Innovative ideas and behavior are often seen as deviant until they change society. One innovation that is currently seen as sufficiently deviant to invite a diagnosis and a treatment is computer gaming. ...the media brand gamers as addicts in need of treatment, antisocial deviants.”

- Torill Elvira Mortensen

In his own research, Boellstorff (2008) commented on the issue of identity by quoting one of his subjects, “The gap between the virtual and actual allows you to define your own role instead of being the one you are in RL (in my case, mother, wife)” (p. 120). In this understanding the actual world is more characterized by “role-playing” than virtual worlds, where one’s self is open to greater self-fashioning and can be more

assertive. Role-based identity is social (Stets and Cast, 2007); it is the identity you assume for interactions with others, based on the exchange of resources that occur in interaction. Bourdieu and Thompson (1991) state, “Linguistic exchange...is also an economic exchange which is established within a symbolic relation of power between a producer, endowed with a certain linguistic capital, and a consumer (or a market), and which is capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit” (p. 66). In the case of virtual identity, this symbolic profit may be affirmative feedback, romance, or community standing as well as economic gain. Mortenson (2008) says, “The real value in multiplayer games is your reputation. Reputation is spread virally through social interaction, but it has few visual or other more explicit expressions” (p. 216). From an understanding of linguistic acronyms (ROTFL = rolling on the floor laughing) to knowing to include an ‘/’ before your text if you want to mute the default typing sound of your chat (important during performances), the mastering of online language and its usage is paramount to role development. In this respect, individuals are learners who work to master skills in order to move from newcomer status toward full participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In her auto-ethnography, Boudreau (2008) explains, “As a young player...I never quite fully understood the avatar/avatar dynamic. It was only as I started to group with other players regularly that I understood how important my physical understanding of the game space and the other active avatars in it were” (p. 81). This “situated learning” assumes that social practice is primary and learning is a characteristic of that practice. Boudreau writes, “Far from being fixed internally in the player, these identities are interwoven through internal and external interactions, creating perceptions

and performances of play that emerge as complex negotiated selves, interacting between spaces in the self and the social” (p. iii).

Castronova (2005) writes that in a virtual world, very little happens individually. The whole point of synthetic spaces is to engage in social interaction, as people have a fundamental need to connect with others. He quotes Richard Bartle’s motivators (see table 1):

Table 1
Motivational Types (abbreviated from Castronova, p.72)

Type	Motivation
Explorers	People who come to see what is there and map it for others. They are happiest with challenges that involve the gradual revelation of the world.
Socializers	People who come to be with others. They are happiest with challenges that involve forming groups with others to accomplish shared objectives.
Achievers	People who come to build. They are happiest with challenges that involve the gradual accumulation of things worthy of social respect.
Controllers	People who come to dominate other people. They are happiest with challenges that involve competing with others and defeating them.

Castronova suggests that people who aren’t satisfied with their real life might find a second, synthetic life more attractive. And those who have “tried on” a synthetic life as one role (or one motivational type) might find another, alternative synthetic life even more attractive. As a result, many virtual world participants have a real life identity as well as several “alt” (alternative) virtual identities, each with its own avatar. These virtual identities are just as subject to salience as any other role-based identity, enabling a

member to travel in and among several collectives, now seeking self-verification or social standing from any number of interactions in something of a “salience hierarchy,” with identities higher in the hierarchy more likely to be invoked in a particular situation (Stryker, Owens, and White, 2000).

Modernity and Maturation – Erikson’s School Age Phase

“If we consider the term modernity descriptive of the current cultural environment in which we live, then the Internet age has created one Universal identity to which we all belong”

- Anthony Giddens

If we reconsider Stryker’s (2000) suggestion that people become members of a particular group because of a common identity and shared belief system that makes collective action possible, then modernity enables people from every corner of the Earth to be part of a collective group, even if they have never met. Giddens (1991) talks about the emergence of communities that are boundary-absent by stating, “A pure relationship is one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver” (p. 6). He goes on to discuss, “No one can ‘opt-out’ of the transformations brought about by modernity...the connecting of the local and global has been tied to a profound set of transmutations in the nature of day-to-day life” (p. 22). Gergen (1991) states, “This massive increment in social stimulation—moving toward a state of saturation—sets the stage both for radical changes in our daily experience of self and others and for unbridled relativism within the academic sphere” (p. ix). Lareau (2003) suggests the “digital divide” that modernity and saturation have introduced may be based more on class economics (those who can afford the tools) as

opposed to race, creating a gap between those who have been raised according to concerted cultivation and those left to an upbringing of natural growth.

This can create a profound sense of inadequacy in those who either don't have access to the technology necessary to become part of this global collective, or those who can't stay current on the latest social media trends. Within Second Life there is not only a minimum hardware requirement in order to participate; there is a learning curve once someone enters the environment in order to become self-sufficient enough to interact with others. Erikson (1968) would consider this social phase part of the maturation process, where one accepts his place as part of a larger group. Stets and Burke (2000) state:

Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's perspective. In contrast, having a particular role identity means acting to fulfill the expectations of the role, coordinating and negotiating interactions with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility. (p. 226)

In his research on social identity, Stryker (2000) suggests that people become members of a particular group because of a common identity and shared belief system that makes collective action possible. It is through repeated activities within a group that personal, role-based identity matures, and collective identity is strengthened. It is by these symbolic social interactions that society and self are conceptualized, group social behavior is structured and governed and personal identity is shaped in favor of the group standard (Stryker, 2007; Barreto and Ellemers, 2002). As a collective, the group assumes

an “identity” not as an entity, but as a continually evolving “image” in the mind of each of it’s participants (Holland, Fox and Daro, 2008). Virtual world interaction, according to Nardi (2005) is less about the transfer of information, than about the “banter” that occurs in social settings that establish feelings of connection. She determines this dynamic interaction “must be kept in a state of sufficient excitation or activation to promote effective communication in which participants exchange information” (p. 92). Nardi writes that three-dimensional virtual environments afford the richness of media that enable participants to create a sense of “presence” with whom they are communicating. Turkle (1997) adds to that thought saying, “My observations of how people are dealing with the lifelike properties of computational objects suggest that they are not constructing hierarchies but multiple definitions of life, which they “alternate” through rapid cycling” (p. 82).

Autonomy – Erikson’s Adolescent Phase

“Starting a new character is like backspacing over your identity mistakes and retyping them a different way. It’s only possible in virtual worlds”

- Richard Bartle

Erikson considers this adolescent phase as the “trying on” of roles. Roles and behaviors have salience when they share a common underlying meaning (Burke and Reitzes, 1981). High role salience with a group affiliation can foster the willingness to take behavioral risks and these behaviors are more likely to occur when the participant can remain anonymous (Smith, Terry, and Hogg, 2006). In theory, if someone assumes a risk-taking identity in a virtual world, it is possible the identity was already present (or the desire for the identity) but there was no suitable social network in real life to attach it

to in order for it to develop into a role. Stryker (2007) asserts, “Identity theory’s fundamental proposition hypothesizes that the choice between or among behaviors expressive of particular roles will reflect the relative locations of the identities in the identity hierarchies” (p. 1092). Turkle (1997) quotes the risk-taking of one of her subjects named Doug:

I’d rather not even talk about that character because its anonymity is very important to me. Let’s just say that on FurryMUDs (where all players are represented as furry animal as opposed to human personas) I feel like a sexual tourist. (p. 74)

Turkle herself admits to her own “exploration” in MUDs by creating avatars of various roles and genders that are able to have “social and sexual encounters with other characters (some of my virtual gender, others not of my virtual gender)” (p. 75). More recently, Turkle (1999) likens this risk taking to Erikson’s identity theory:

It is a time during which one’s actions are, in a certain sense, not counted as they will be later in life. They are not given as much weight, not given the force of full-judgment. In this context, experimentation can become the norm rather than a brave departure. Relatively consequence-free experimentation facilitates the development of a “core self,” a personal sense of what gives life meaning that Erikson called “identity.” (p. 644)

Dickey (2003) agrees by saying, “Virtual environments offer many benefits such as opportunities for experimentation without real-world repercussions” (p. 106). Her work in virtual world learning and the affordances of the space as a constructivist environment

suggests 3D worlds are a place where the playing field is leveled for disadvantaged users and autonomy adds to this “leveling.”

Interestingly enough, many performing musicians choose not to be autonomous; they use Second Life to market themselves and their real life music efforts. When this is the case it is not unusual for the performer to have a real-life picture as part of their avatar profile, as a prop during performances, and as even click-through signage that will allow a fan to open a browser window to the artist’s real life website in order to purchase music.

Intimacy

“I show that Second Life culture is profoundly human. It is not only that virtual worlds borrow assumptions from real life; virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our “real” lives have been “virtual” all along.”

- Tom Boellstorff

Nardi’s (2005) research into the dimensions of connection reveal that affinity, commitment, and attention, are key factors in social bonding (p. 99). Affinity is comprised of:

- Touch
- Eating and drinking (together)
- Sharing experience in a common space
- Informal conversation

In a 3D environment, these factors become “virtually” possible. The ability to commit to a mutual relationship with another exists not only in continued virtual presence but also in a virtual world developers’ ability to formalize partnerships, just as someone would marry in real life (Boellstorff, 2008). Attention affordances in virtual environments may include avatar eye contact, animated actions, or negotiated availability between participants. For someone in ‘music’ arts, who Huizinga (1970) says is predisposed to play anyway, this bonding is forged by the need for a performer to bask in the adulation of fans:

From another angle, of course, we might say that the play-element in art has been fortified by the very fact that the artist is held to be above the common run of mortals. As a superior being he claims a certain amount of veneration as his due, In order to savor his superiority to the full he will require a reverential public or circle of kindred spirits, who will pour forth the requisite veneration more understandingly than the public at large with its empty phrases. (p. 229)

Gergen (1991) suggests that technological tools have increased the proliferation of relationships that can be maintained at any one time and while the past is preserved, “continuously poised to insert itself into the present there is an *acceleration of the future*. The pace of relationships is hurried, and processes of unfolding that one required months or years may be accomplished in days or weeks” (p. 62). He goes on to mention the nature of these new relationships is being constantly disrupted, making it “more difficult for any given relationship to normalize” due to the cast of “significant others” that is constantly in motion. The ability for autonomy creates a condition where people who have a need to belong can enter a virtual space and find affiliations they are unable to

find in real life. (Stryker, Owens, and White, 2000). Autonomy also enables participants to talk more truthfully about real life conditions, forming deep relationships that are situational in nature. (Adler and Adler, 2008). Lave and Wenger (1991) research legitimate peripheral participation as situated learning in education but their work can certainly be applied here in the level of participation that is necessary to become a fully functioning member of a group. Their work indicates an increasing relational interdependency of agent (participant) and environment with the constant situated renegotiation of meaning within the space. Simply put, the level of attachment (embeddedness or agency) to a group in this case is a function of how much an individual moves from a position of “inexperienced outsider” to “experienced insider.” In Second Life, this movement most often includes social interaction with others. Yee (2006) has reported the average age of computer and video game players is 30, that women are typically older than the men they interact with, and while their motivations for a virtual presence may differ than men (building supportive social networks, escape from real-life stress), they find the same appeal and emotional satisfaction from online environments as men.

Posthumanism – Virtual Adulthood

“In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.”

- N. Catherine Hayles

The work of researchers such as James Clifford and can help make sense of questions about virtual identity, particularly with respect to what causes a person to

choose one type of identity over another. After looking more closely at Clifford's work with indigenous populations that faced extinction as the modern world threatened their culture, it's possible that the choice of a virtual identity might be the product of a voice (identity) that is subaltern, looking to emerge and adapt within a community of like-minded members (Clifford, 2003a). This concept is not new; there has always been a tension between what is tradition and what struggles to emerge. Clifford (2003b) states, "Any community's ability to persist, to innovate, to change its own terms, is relative to its structural power" (p.153). In a virtual space community is constantly in a state of flux, as people bring their own cultural footprint in and out of the community at will. As this trans-world opportunity arises and we hold our synthetic lives to be as important as our real lives, the value we place on the status and good we attain in our synthetic life will stake on the same value as if they were real. Synthetic worlds are becoming a legitimate alternate life for millions of people and that number is expected to increase.

Posthumanism, which has its roots in theories such as cybernetics, information theory, and cognitive thought, centers on how information (such as identity or cultural markers) "lost its body, that is, how it came to be conceptualized as an entity separate from the material forms in which it is thought to be embedded" (Hayles, 1999, p.2). Hayle also explains, "The posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began long before we were born" (p. 3). If we can consider this to be true, then occupying an avatar as our prosthetic representation is a mutation of *choice*. Some might consider this dual existence to be a hallmark of postmodernism.

Hayles (1999), in discussing the research of virtual pioneers Harold Rheingold and Hans Moravec, states:

They concur that the posthuman implies not only a coupling with intelligent machines but a coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the information circuits in which the organism is enmeshed. (p. 35)

Foster (2005) states, “Posthumanism emerges when technology does in fact “become me,” not by being incorporated into my organic unity and integrity, but instead by interrupting the unity and opening the boundary between self and world.” He then goes on to quote Hayles by suggesting that the posthuman impulse is to “erase embodiment” and consider humans as “inscriptions” that can be “frictionlessly transferred into another medium” (p. 10). While Foster’s work revolves more around cyberpunk than posthumanism, his work suggests the ideal of “abstract citizenship” where it is necessary to look for new places to inhabit once we have morphed (as humans) past the ability of our current environment to contain us.

Embeddedness (Immersion) and Play

“From an economic perspective, it is the interest of an MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplay Game) producers that their game be as addictive as cigarettes.”

- Corneliussen and Walker Rettberg

While Boudreau’s (2008) research focused on a different virtual world, her assessment of play and meaning is consistent with participants in Second Life:

Through the negotiation of shared meanings, player-to-player relationships are a fundamental element that helps create meaning within the play. These relationships evolve, and dissolve. Sometimes they grow into group and guild relationships where players share common goals. Sometimes the relationships are competitive, perhaps even hostile, but they all carry the potential to influence the process of identity construction and development. (p. 85)

As participants assign more meaning and value to their synthetic lives, they amass the material possessions that their particular class status views as necessary. This can be anything from weapons of warfare, to homes and beachfront land. Houses in virtual spaces can have all the trappings of a real (and possibly better) life: pools, cars, designer furniture and art (Castronova, 2005). Bartle (2004) states, “It’s about identity. When player and character merge to become a persona, *that’s* immersion; *that’s* what people get from virtual worlds that they can’t get from anywhere else; *that’s* when they stop playing the world and start living it” (p.19). This assigned value and meaning can understandably lead to embeddedness or immersion in the virtual identity and lifestyle one has created, particularly if it is more pleasurable than real life. Successful real/virtual living however requires one to eventually be able to separate the avatar from the person. Kegan (1994) describes the elevation to a fourth-order consciousness:

The ability to thus subordinate, regulate, and indeed create (rather than be created by) our values and ideals—the ability to take those values and ideals as the object rather than the subject of our knowing—must necessarily be an expression of a fourth order of consciousness, evinced here in the mental making of an ideology or explicit system of belief. (p. 91)

The fourth order of consciousness assumes someone can engage in conflict without taking it personally, can separate performance from the person, and is less concerned with the “act,” as they are with the perceptions the act evokes in the souls of others. It is a time of “rising above” the petty, a process of maturation into something more of a sage, than a student. This makes for a balanced, peaceful life but it may not be enough to successfully navigate a virtual existence. This is where Kegan (1982) suggests a higher, fifth order of consciousness. At this level, there is a separation of self from the institution, which “which frees the self from that displacement of value whereby the maintenance of the institution has become the end in itself; there is now a self who runs the organization, where before there was a self who *was* the organization. The self is no longer subject to the societal” (pp. 103-104). Simply put, this enables individuals to completely separate their real existence from the activities of their avatar. They have a relationship with their avatar, but they *are not* their avatar. Their avatar has relationships, but they are able to emotionally separate what happens in the virtual space, from what happens outside of it.

This is a significant separation, as we will see as we move forward. It supports the idea of determining what the term “moral” means at any point in time. Dewey (2002, but originally written in 1922) asserts:

Conflict and uncertainty are ultimate traits. But morals based upon concern with facts and deriving guidance from knowledge of them would at least locate the points of effective endeavor and would focus available resources upon them. It would put an end to the possible attempt to live in two unrelated worlds. It would destroy fixed distinction between the human and the physical, as well as between the moral and the industrial and political. (p. 12)

While object orientation seems to move us away from a sense of embeddness as we mature (both as real and virtual identities), the idea of play seems to do just the opposite.

When we play, we seem to become more immersed. Huizinga (1970) asks:

Why does the gambler lose himself in the game? This intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet this intensity, this absorption, this power of maddening, lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play. (p. 20-21)

Huizinga goes on to suggest that those in the arts (i.e. musicians) have a strong play element as the very nature of their craft:

A certain playfulness is by no means lacking in the process of creating and ‘producing’ a work of art. This was obvious enough in the arts of the muses or ‘music’ arts, where a strong play-element may be called fundamental, indeed essential to them. (p.227)

The issues of play and the production of work are also central to Vygotsky’s research about children’s mental and emotional development. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) write about Vygotsky’s work in the use of artifacts as symbols (such as candy as treasure) and how children will ignore fatigue and hunger for the sake of continuing play, stating “They learn to detach themselves from their reactions to their immediate surroundings, to enter a play world—a conceptual world that differs from everyday—and react to the imagined objects and events of that world” (p.50). Rodriguez (2006) suggests play “consists of a trans-individual process of action and reaction, which often takes on a to-and-fro quality reminiscent of a dance” (p. 2). Nardi (2005) says, “It seems likely that the more senses one engages in an experience, the more intense it

becomes” (p. 106). Bartle (2004) looks at immersion from the vantage point of game designers:

The key to immersion is *persuasion*. The more persuasive an environment is, the easier it is to become immersed in it. The biggest weapon in the designer’s armory of persuasion is familiarity. You might at an intellectual level know you’re in a virtual world, but if everything acts just like it would in the real world then you gradually find yourself treating the world as if it were real while knowing it isn’t. Because you do know it isn’t real, you can still behave as an individual in ways that you wouldn’t if you were in the real world, yet because it feels real you can nevertheless believe you’re in it. When knowledge and belief coincide, that’s immersion. (p. 67)

This certainly seems to open the door for an understanding of the level of avatar embeddedness for musicians and other creative individuals who exert more passion and “self” into their virtual personae. Nardi (2005) looks at the work of activity theorists Vygotsky and Leontiev to determine that passionately held motives are at the core of activity; needs, desires, interests, and emotion precede action. In their work on intense engagement, Hoffman, Perillo, Calizo, Hadfield, and Lee (2005) describe common conditions of passionate engagement:

- risk – uncertain outcome with much at stake;
- support for spontaneity – freedom to create;
- novelty – environments beyond comfort zone;
- challenges that match skills – mastery of tools;
- community – support and affirmative feedback; and

- creative Action – action involves creating something new (pp. 11-12)

Turkle (1999) looks at these passionately held motives in her assessment of virtual play:

Cyberspace opens the possibility for identity play, but it is very serious play.

People who cultivate an awareness of what stands behind their screen personae are the ones most likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal and social transformation. And the people who make the most of their lives on the screen are those who are able to approach it in a spirit of self-reflection. What does my behavior in cyberspace tell me about what I want, who I am, what I may not be getting in the rest of my life? (p. 647)

Migration to Real Life

When my own family came to America from Italy, they were *immigrants*. They understood they had a one-way ticket to the United States and in order to become a recognized member of the group that was titled “American,” they had to renounce their allegiance to Italy. They might have been known as Italian-Americans (the *habitus* to which they belonged), but they were no longer Italian citizens. This is *not* what happens when an individual leaves their real-life and logs into their virtual life. Whatever the motivation to participate, there is a powerful effect of synthetic roles on the self-development of the user, both inside and outside the synthetic world (Castronova, 2005).

The work presented by Boellstorff (2008) concurs:

For some, this sense of a permeable border between actual-world and virtual-world self was experienced in positive terms. Their online lives could make their actual-world self more “real,” in that it could become closer to what they understood to be their true selfhood, unencumbered by social constraints or the

particularities of physical embodiment. Common in this regard was the view that virtual world experiences could lead to greater self-confidence. (p. 121)

Clifford (1997) echoes this sense of *migration*, which doesn't describe a one-way movement but a back and forth cultural movement between spaces; an iterative reconstruction where power and culture cause changes to take place with each iteration. Giddens (1991) calls it an "emptying of time and space" that set processes in motion to establish a single world "where none existed previously." Yee (2007) has conducted research into what he has called the Proteus Effect. This is a process by which someone develops avatar characteristics which they feel will give them social advantage. Yee's work experimented with relative attractiveness and height, where regardless of what the person behind the avatar looked like in real life, if the avatar was attractive and tall, the person (as the avatar) began to exhibit the same social characteristics that would be expected in real life interactions. The participant became more assertive, and more aggressive in financial transactions. This shouldn't surprise anyone who has experienced an anonymous virtual life. What is very surprising however is Yee's work proving that once someone has interacted in these expected ways as an avatar, *the behaviors migrate into the participant's real life interactions.*

Conversely, Turkle (1995) writes about a subject who *could not* migrate these attributes to real-life due to an illness that isolated him. Stewart (the subject's pseudonym) lived an entirely different virtual life, compared to the significantly dysfunctional real life he was a prisoner to. Online, Stewart lived a charming, romantic fantasy, marrying the love of this life in a ceremony that included guests from several countries. The barriers to migration of these attributes into Stewart's real life (due to his

living situation and illness) caused Stewart to sum up his experience as “an addicting waste of time.” It may well be that there are limits to successful migration based on real-life circumstances. Often, disparate identities will shift slowly toward each other by changing identity standards over time finding an “equilibrium point” where all identities can find meaning at the same time (Burke, 2006).

Reflection on the Literature

Without an understanding of identity theory, social interaction theory, and orders of consciousness, it would be impossible to embark upon a study of what influences the crafting of identity in virtual environments. We looked at how “normal” development progressed according to Erikson’s framework, the importance of feedback and self-verification in the affirmation of identity, and how Kegan’s orders of consciousness mapped a shift from being self-oriented to seeing the self as a separate system as part of a much larger global organization. A reminder: These theories assume a “normal” development that progresses from one step to another in sequential order (often with approximate timeframes).

With this firm foundation it was possible to apply these same frameworks to virtual worlds, with consideration to how technology, cultural migration, and structural interaction influence what happens when an individual assumes a virtual persona. Turkle (1995) aligns Erikson’s work to virtual worlds:

For example, Erikson pointed out that successful intimacy in young adulthood is difficult if one does not come to it with a sense of who one is. This is the challenge of adolescent identity building. In real life, however, people frequently move on with incompletely resolved stages, simply doing the best they can. They

use whatever materials they have at hand to get as much as they can of what they have missed. MUDs are striking examples of how technology can play a role in these dramas of self-repair. (p. 204)

My own study hopes to add to this impressive body of research in the uniqueness of my focus group: virtually performing musicians. These creative individuals may be more predetermined to passionate engagement and embeddedness (immersion) with their avatar personae than participants in general. This may be a function of the time they spend in Second Life relative to others, the self-affirming feedback they receive from a fan base, or it may be more of an outcome of a persona that has no outlet for creativity in real life.

While it might not be difficult to imagine a real-life performer who has a private persona that is very different from their professional identity, a virtual performer may have two or more identities. In addition to forming a virtual identity in the same manner as anyone else, they also have a professional persona that might or might not be salient with their real life—or even their virtual one. Regardless, they are pioneers in inventing the traditions by which the innovative culture of virtual performance is known. By including virtual performers who also are real-life performers as well as those who keep their private life very separate from their virtual lives, it is possible to examine how salient these identities are, how much real life embodies virtual life, and how real-life has changed (if at all) by having a virtual life as a performer.

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