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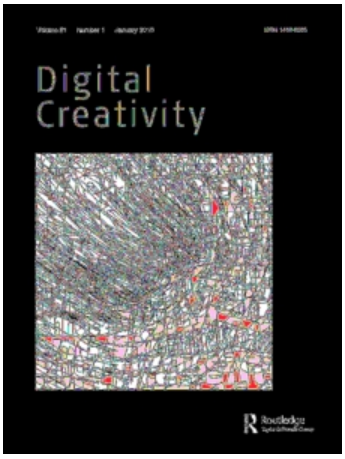

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Cyberbody as drag

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Cyberbody as drag

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Abstract

Drawing on the topological approach Jacques Lacan developed late in his career, this paper explores the relation between a user and an avatar interpreted as prosthetic, so that an avatar is seen as a prosthetic consciousness and unconscious, a user's virtual 'Self'. Lacan's topological concept of 'extimacy' that subverts the opposition between the inside and outside is used in support of such an interpretation. The 3-D virtual world of Second Life is taken as an example to illustrate the digital projection of a user's gender identity. The paper suggests that Second Life is application of attachable genitals in addition to basic male and female avatar patterns makes the virtual process of taking a gender identity similar to real life sexuation. This interpretation leads to a conclusion about the fixity of the ego in the imaginary realm (a typical human feature, according to Lacan) and challenges the main postulates of posthumanism.

Keywords: Avatar, body, cyberspace, gender identity, human subject, interface, posthuman, psychoanalysis, sexuality, sex, topology, technology, Self

it is the absence of the penis that makes her phallus, the object of desire. Evoke this absence in a more precise way by having her wear a cute fake one under a fancy dress, and you, or rather she, will have plenty to tell us about (Lacan 2002b, p. 699).

1 A Lacanian subject and cyberspace

To Lacan, the subject is condemned to the body, rather than to his consciousness. In his seminars, he alters the spelling of the word '*l'ontologie*' to '*l'hontologie*,' playing with the French word for shame, *l'honte*, to describe the human subject as the subject of shame. Elaborating on Lacan's explanation, Jacques-Alain Miller suggests that when people meet, they 'apologise' for their bodies: their bodies are never 'perfect', never adequate, and never quite behave exactly how people want them to.[1] Thus, it is only logical that many seem to expect cyberspace to be an alternative universe where users can be freed from the burden of the body of flesh and from the necessity of any such apology. Metaphorically, cyberspace has been depicted as 'the place between the phones', 'the indefinite place *out there*, where … human beings, actually meet and communicate' (Sterling 1992, p. xxii). By extension of this metaphor, cyberspace has been often described as either a realm where users can discover their so-called 'true Selves', or where users acquire new identities through whose performance in the virtual realm they may eventually become in reality what they have created on-line. Such thinking is a big step forward from a Cartesian subject's escapist

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Digital Creativity, Vol. 21, No. 1

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dreams: the naïve assumption that the mind can leave the body and travel in cyberspace on its own. In his book *Interface Fantasy. A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology*, André Nusselder makes the point that:

we are not in the autonomous position of the modern subject or representation that, although seduced by all sorts of imagery and bodily pleasures, is still capable of detaching itself 'spiritually' from its illusions. Neither are we only 'post-modern' subjects of seduction that lack a positive and critical point of reference for evaluating the manifold of lures (Nusselder 2009, p. 79).

An increasing level of augmentation and the impact of on-line experiences on the users' real life behaviour is described by Stanford University's research team of Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson as the *Proteus Effect* (Yee and Bailenson 2007, p. 3). They state that a constructed on-line identity affects one's identity in reality. This effect, in the words of Lacanian scholar Renata Salecl, is described more precisely as a result of 'the push to new enjoyment from the media' that leads to 'increasing plasticity in terms of identification' (Salecl 2006).

Way before cyberspace became available to users, Jacques Lacan suggested that the desire to be someone else is typical of the human subject (the common inquiries about the 'true Self' are merely a variation of this desire). According to Lacan's definition of the subject as 'what one signifier represents to another signifier', the subject is an effect of representation. The subject is alienated and divided that results in the subject's *otherness*, expressed by Arthur Rimbaud's line '*je est un autre*' ('I is an other'), and seen by Lacan as the subject's essential characteristic. Besides, and this is crucial for Lacan, the subject is also the body, the bodily *jouissance* or the manner in which the body enjoys.

Lacan's later work brings together the realms of representation and the realm of *jouissance* by means of the topology of knots. The Borromean knot is a joining of the four orders—the real, the imaginary, the symbolic and the symptom—and is Lacan's description of the structure of the human psyche. To Lacan, this topological figure is a non-metaphorical way to explore the relationship between the four orders—the imaginary (the realm of *imago* and relationships), the symbolic (the realm of language, culture and law), the real (that is traumatic and always returns, yet lacks mediation, absolutely resists symbolisation and therefore is 'impossible' and unbearable), and the symptom. The way the four orders coordinate consciousness and unconsciousness emanates from the imaginary order of representations that exists, in the words of Ellie Ragland, as 'the interpretative record of the outside world's symbolic data and of real effects and events' (Ragland-Sullivan 1987, p. 131).

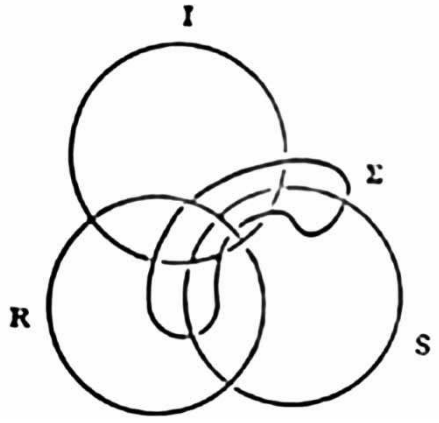

Figure 1. Lacan's Borromean knot: the real (R), the imaginary (I), the symbolic (S) and the symptom (Σ). © 1976 Jacques-Alain Miller. Reproduced with permission of the copyright holder.

2 Topological space

The topological approach is the basis of Lacan's work with surfaces (i.e. the Möbius strip and torus) before the 70s and knots (i.e. the Borromean knot) after 1972, and provides a useful way of conceptualising the process of taking on a gender identity. As Ragland and Milovanovic point out, Lacan used topological forms and the logic of their function to develop two meaning systems: one of representations and one of a *jouissance* that materialises language by placing desire and fantasy within it (Ragland and Milovanovic

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Digital Creativity, Vol. 21, No. 1

2004, p. xiii). Topology, or 'abstract geometry', is an area of mathematics that examines how spatial properties of objects persevere despite continuous deformation, such as stretching and bending (but no cutting and gluing); this is called homeomorphism. For instance, a cup and a doughnut are homeomorphic from the point of view of topology, as each object can be 'turned' into the another without breaking the object's surface. Topology offers a new, non-Euclidean understanding of space, where the notion of 'dimension' is not applicable: topology 'dispenses with all references to distance, size, area and angle, and is based only on a concept of closeness' (Evans 1996, p. 210). Thus, when we think about the space of an on-line interaction, we can describe the computer screen as a two- or three-dimensional Euclidian space. However, when we extend the space of the interaction to include the user in front of the screen, this extended space becomes topological as the user's presence and agency are distributed both 'here' and 'there', which allows us to speak about this space as possessing such properties as convergence, connectedness, continuity, proximity and ubiquity. For that reason, to see cyberspace as a realm where one 'escapes from reality' is to ignore the topological properties of the realm of 't/here', where the relationship between the elements of the different meaning systems—representations and identifications, on the one side, and desire, fantasy and the drives on the other—can be described as homeomorphic.

'Affective avatars' virtualise our sensations (Nusselder 2009, p. 93), and by making us aware of what we may, for instance, enjoy or fear, they impact our identification with them. One of the ways that cyberspace 'screens us' is by making it obvious that we create a desirable image of the 'Self' by means of verbal or visual presentations, just as we design our on-line egos, our avatars. The 'Self,' thus, has no essence to be found; on the contrary, it needs the mirror image, or avatar, to develop content and provide sense of unity. The computer screen can be compared to the '*imago*' as 'the face that determines how things appear to a desiring subject' (Nusselder 2009, p 78); this proves the computer interface is neither neutral nor transparent. The interface is a 'filter' that allows some aspects of an identity the user projects on-screen to return to the user elucidated, acknowledged and, in many cases, adopted in one way or another since they come from the user's (on-screen) 'own Self'. In the topological space of a user–computer interaction, the interface is the point of a bend or a stretch that results in taking a new shape.

3 Extimacy and fantasy

Fantasy, or here, 'interface fantasy', as Nusselder terms it, stages desire on screen. Fantasy is not reduced to imagination and does not belong only to the level of the imaginary. According to Lacan, an image of the fantasy occupies a place in the symbolic structure. He sees fantasy as protective against the unbearable real; as such, it maintains both fears and pleasures. In the techno-age, when technology constantly promises fulfilment of desires, fantasy is what mediates interiority and exteriority, private and social, a user on the one side of the screen with/in the social, the Other on the other side. Tom Boellstorff observes that in today's on-line experience, 'the most significant shift is not from augmentation to immersion or vice versa; it is the shift from sensory immersion to social immersion as techne's assumed effect' (Boellstorff 2008, pp. 115–116).

Lacan, too, speaks about fusion of the inside and outside, intimate and social/cultural/communal, and describes it by his concept of 'extimacy' (*extimité*) introduced in his 1959–60 Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. The concept refers to the relation between the individual realm of a user's subjectivity and the public realm of social reality. The term is formed by applying the prefix *ex* from *exterieur* to the French word *intimité*, meaning 'intimacy'; it was meant to question a bipartition between inside and outside. Almost thirty years later, Jacques-Alain Miller developed Lacan's understanding of the subject as 'ex-centric', with its centre being outside. Miller explains Lacan's phrase 'the unconscious is outside' as the real being in the

Digital Creativity, Vol. 21, No. 1

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symbolic (Miller 1994, p. 75). In the context of our discussion, the (symbolic) realm of a network community behind an opaque computer screen is a materialisation, or rather, virtualisation, of the Other whose presence and whose discourse are always 'at the very center of intimacy' (Miller 1994, p. 77) and are mediated by fantasy. In other words, by this term, Lacan emphasises the role of the social for the acquisition of the body image by a subject and claims that the Other determines the very appearance of the body, as well as the ways the body enjoys. The body becomes that 'surface upon which the Other writes' (Verhaeghe 2001, p. 3). Therefore, a Lacanian topological approach offers a new ontology of a subject, emphasising that the core of human identity resides 'outside'. Particularly, Lacan's use of the Mobius strip provides us a topological way of conceptualising such a relationship: no distinction between inside and outside can be made: two sides form one surface.

Cyberspace is often seen as less complicated and traumatic than interaction within the social or symbolic realm; cyberspace seems a reservoir for possibilities to easily inscribe oneself into its alternative symbolic realm of social networks. By selecting the traces of one's real life appearance, sex, gender, and social status, a user constructs an imaginary identity of him- or herself as 'someone who . . . .' In this way, s/he obtains a place in the social realm on-line. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun observes,

passing is a form of agency, which brings together the two disparate meanings of agency: the power to act, and the power to act on another's behalf. In doing so, it reveals the tension inherent to agency, the ways in which it is compromised even when it is effective, the ways in which agency is most forceful when mediated (Chun 2006, p. 56).

Virtual reality 'screens' us by allowing temporary identification with an on-line character and also temporary *passing as an other* in the public eye. Different sites—Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, LiveJournal or MySpace—allow through their means of presentation for the construction of very different imaginary 'Selves' (yet, with a common property of *otherness*, no matter whether an avatar has a real or fictional name). The identity has a number of aspects from sex, gender and race to discourse, occupation, religion, age, place of birth and so on. In the following, I will focus on one of the sites, Second Life (an open source software, Linden Research, Inc., 2003), and on only one aspect of identity, gender, as an example of how new technologies challenge and channel sexuality.

4 Sexuation

Lacan distinguishes between sexuality and sexuation. While the former is specific, the latter is a broad term encompassing a variety of aspects: by 'sexuation', Lacan designates the process of taking on an identity as gendered. Long before Lacan, in 1905, Sigmund Freud noted that 'psycho-analytic research has found that all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object-choice and have in fact made one in their unconscious' (Freud 1953, p. 145). Tim Dean and Christopher Lane comment on this important essay of Freud's:

Rather than simply revealing homosexuality as a normal and natural expression of human erotic potential, Freud's connecting sexuality to the unconscious instead makes all sexuality perverse: 'The disposition to perversions is itself of no great rarity but must form a part of what passes as the normal constitution.' The idea of the unconscious dramatically changes how we can and should think about human sexuality (Dean and Lane 2001, p. 4).

In other words, Freud already came to a conclusion that one can make an object choice regardless of one's biological sex and even regardless of one's assumed gender identity. This makes a gender identity always incomplete. Even an imagined identity in a simulated world like Second Life it cannot be brought to a completion. Moreover, given its imaginary nature, virtual reality actually demonstrates some of the key mechanisms of human relations maintained 'only by the way of mediating images, illusions of gender, irrespective of whether the sexual relationship in question is heterosexual, homosexual, or of some

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other kind' (Dean 2000, p. 83). Cyberspace is a powerful tool through which users can visualise fantasy, which, Lacan explains, allows sustaining desire and is only another 'screen', demonstrating one's unique way of enjoyment, one's *jouissance*. The choice of identification, Alexander Stevens points out, that allows the subject to be part of a community' (Stevens 2007, p. 213) is an important side of the practices of cyber-embodiment in Second Life. Similar to that which Judith Shapiro says about transsexualism, such practice 'makes us realize that we are all passing' (Shapiro 1992, p. 257) or, in the words of Tim Dean, that 'we are all in drag, whether or not we're aware of it' (Dean 2000, p. 70).

In Second Life, the users design their avatars by altering and adjusting the suggested basic patterns to embody their imaginary 'selves'. Upon signing up, a user is a free to choose between male and female basic patterns. To avoid direct sexual implications, Second Life offers the default male and female avatar patterns without genitals. In Second Life, the subject performs a gender identity in several ways—discursively (through instant messages) and by means of representation (through graphics). The discourse employed is not new. In many ways it borrows the techniques of chat rooms (cyber sex slang, rhythm and timing of typing, symbols, etc.). As for graphics, in the majority of cases the default gendered shapes of 'male' and 'female' seem to be insufficient to embody gender as users imagine it. What is especially interesting is that the choice of a virtual body, even if different than a user's real-life 'sex', is not enough. In addition to the male and female shapes, a user can purchase attachable genitals. As of today, attachable genitals of all sorts are among the best-selling products in Second Life.

To engage an avatar in virtual sex, a user clicks on a sex animation ball, which causes two or more avatars to perform a sexual act on screen. Digital genitals, usually attached beforehand, are almost never in synchronicity with sex animations, yet their apparent inability to function effectively does not prevent them from being a must-have addition to a default avatar. These attachments are mostly interactive. 'Touching' them (by a simple mouse manipulation) sometimes brings up an on-screen description of erotic sensation that our imagined on-screen character experiences for us or performs instead of us. 'Interpassivity', a term introduced by Slavoj Žižek, could be helpful for defining the relation between a user and an avatar in such cases, when a user only assumes s/he had a certain experience without actually having it (Žižek 1999). This is analogous to the effect of 'canned laughter' on a film soundtrack; hearing this, a viewer thinks s/he laughed watching a very funny film.

In Lacanian vocabulary, Second Life digital genitals might be described as *the imaginary phallus*, or 'the role the [biological] organ plays in fantasy' (Evans 1996, p. 143) that 'can be better understood on the basis of its function' (Lacan 2002a, p. 579). As Ellie Ragland writes on the logic of sexuation, 'the phallus is the abstract signifier of difference which function—and this is crucial—is to give a person access to the Other via the fantasmatic constitution of desire' (Ragland 2004, pp. 20–21). What is an abstract 'function' in reality takes the graphic shape of an attachable genital in the imaginary realm of Second Life and becomes a manifestation of gender that a user is willing to take on in given circumstances.

Apparently, Second Life users do not think of digital genitals as what 'completes' their avatar as 'male' or 'female'. Second Life displays gender identities as unfixed. Its playful anonymous practice allows articulation of desires and establishing gender identities beyond the symbolic realm and normative masquerade of real life. In Second Life, one meets 'shemales', cross-gendered characters, 'genderqueers' who identify themselves as straight in real life, and vice versa. In many cases, users have a number of attachable male and/or female genitals in their inventory that allow them to rather often switch and modify their symbolic positions as 'male' and 'female' by combining the features of both. In other words, 'the masculine is not opposed to the feminine but, rather, is defined as being asymmetrical to the feminine' (Ragland 2004, pp. 26–27). The

Digital Creativity, Vol. 21, No. 1

Figure 2. Attachable genitals on sale in Second Life. © 2009 Svitlana Matviyenko. Reproduced with permission of the copyright holder.

easiness with which users abandon the rules of the normative masquerade in the imaginary realm of Second Life suggests the fixity of the ego in the imaginary and the desire to develop it, taking on new gender identities. Such desire is not mere

Figure 3. A user who identifies himself as a heterosexual male in reality is using a female avatar 'for aesthetical reasons'. © 2009 Svitlana Matviyenko. Reproduced with permission of the copyright holder.

imagination, it is a bodily desire, *jouissance*. It contains both fear to lose the consistency of the imaginary 'Self' and the bodily pleasure provided by images. In other words, speaking topologically, the actual 'there' is the virtual 'here', and the body becomes the arena for a simulated sexual act on the computer screen performed by means of a graphical representation and fantasy. With a little stretch, it is implied that the body extends to the avatar—prostheticaly. An avatar should be thought as a cyberprosthesis of the user's consciousness and unconsciousness which here, as in Lacan's later work, are not separated.

5 Conclusion: all too human cyborgs

As revealed in psychoanalytical practice, sexual identity can be assumed by means of *imago* (or 'prosthetic') mirror image (Salecl 2000, p. 7) and relationships, and within language, culture and ethical tradition (what in Lacan's vocabulary is called the imaginary and the symbolic), but, of course, not without participation of the real and the symptom, the kernel of everybody's unique enjoyment. In cyberspace, the four topological orders are virtualised, and therefore a user is engaged in altering gender identities and new sexual practices in a more playful manner, which only supports adaptation of the created patterns in real life.

This leads us to a conclusion that the growing engagement of the virtual world with the most intimate (or rather, *extimate*) experiences by means of new technologies does not make us 'less human'; on the contrary, it demonstrates the fixity of the ego in the imaginary, in the sphere of relationships and *imago* that Lacan believed is essential for the human subject. The users' desire to explore new possibilities in this sphere by multiplying and altering their imaginary projections of fantasy of whom they may be in the topological space of 't/here' show the new technogenesis. For those who foresee the end of the human in the age of fibre optics, this should be a reminder that the posthuman is, in fact, all too human.

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Notes

[1] The phrase comes from Jacques-Alain Miller's unpublished seminar *Donc* (1994–5). For this article I am using the notes taken during the seminar by Ellie Ragland.

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