



The real problem: avatars, metaphysics and online social interaction

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Abstract

It is often assumed that the problem with ‘virtual reality’ – the concept, its various technological deployments and the apparently oxymoronic phrase itself – has been our understanding, or perhaps misunderstanding, of the virtual. The real problem, however, is not with the virtual; it is with the real itself. This article investigates the undeniably useful but ultimately mistaken and somewhat misguided concept of the real that has been routinely operationalized in investigations of new media technology. The specific point of contact for the examination is the avatar. What is at issue here is not the complicated structures and articulations of avatar identity but the assumed ‘real thing’ that is said to be its ultimate cause and referent. In addressing this subject, the article considers three theories of the real, extending from Platonism to the recent innovations of Slavoj Žižek, and investigates their effect on our understanding of computer-generated experience and social interaction.

Keywords

avatar, computer games, computer-mediated communication, computers, MMORPG, philosophy of technology, social aspects, virtual reality, Slavoj Žižek

One of the more compelling and persistent social issues regarding computer-mediated communication (CMC) has to do with user proxies or avatars. The word ‘avatar’, which is of Sanskrit origin denoting incarnation or the physical embodiment of the divine, has been utilized, at least since Neil Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (2000) and the ‘many-player online virtual environment’ of LucasFilms *Habitat* (Morningstar and Farmer, 1991: 274), to designate the virtual representative of a user in a text-based multiple user domain (MUD), a massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG), a non-gaming 3D immersive environment like *Second Life*, or a social network like Facebook, MySpace

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and LinkedIn. 'At its core,' as Mark Meadows (2008: 23) succinctly describes it, 'an avatar is a simple thing. . . . It is an interactive, social representation of a user.' As is clear from the technical, popular and critical literature on this subject, what makes the avatar remarkable is that users have the ability to manipulate its appearance, attributes and characteristics, either creating it in their own image or engaging in imaginative and often fanciful constructions. 'For some players,' as Nick Yee (2008) points out, 'the avatar becomes a purposeful projection or idealization of their own identity, while for others, the avatar is an experiment with new identities.'

Critical responses to this have pulled in two different directions. On the one hand, the ability to manipulate avatar characteristics is celebrated as a means by which to liberate one's self from the unfortunate accidents imposed by real physical bodies situated in geophysical space. Indicative of this kind of response is Mark Dery's (1994: 3) introduction to *Flame Wars*, one of the first critical anthologies addressing CMC: 'The upside of incorporeal interaction: a technologically enabled, postmulticultural vision of identity disengaged from gender, ethnicity, and other problematic constructions. On line, users can float free of biological and sociocultural determinants.' On the other hand, critics point out how this activity not only neglects the limitations and exigencies of real physical bodies but reproduces, as Sandy Stone (1991) and others have argued, some of the worst forms of Cartesian thinking. 'By virtue of being physically disembodied from the creator,' Beth Simone Noveck (2006: 269–70) argues, 'avatars in the theater of the game space may act in antisocial and even pathological ways – ways in which the "real" person never would – shooting, maiming, and killing in brutal fashion.' Additionally, and perhaps worse, researchers like Lisa Nakamura (1995, 2002) and Jennifer Gonzáles (2000) have demonstrated how avatar identity often times reproduces, reinforces and trades on conventional and highly problematic stereotypes of race, ethnicity and gender. By means of this rather disturbing form of 'identity tourism', as Nakamura (2002) calls it, users 'use race and gender as amusing prostheses to be donned and shed without "real life" consequences' (Nakamura, 2002: 13–14).

As long as inquiry remains defined by the terms and conditions of this debate very little will change. Investigators will continue to deploy and entertain what is by now easily recognizable arguments, somewhat predictable evidence and, in the final analysis, unresolved controversies. For this reason, the present study undertakes another approach and method of analysis. This alternative does not, it is important to note, simply dismiss the controversy concerning avatar identity, but reconsiders it from an altogether different perspective. Instead of adhering to and operating within the terms stipulated by the current debate, we can also fix on and question what they already agree upon and hold in common. Such an investigation would target not the differences between the enthusiastic supporters of creative role playing and the critics of virtual violence, antisocial behavior and identity tourism but the shared values and assumptions that both sides must endorse, whether conscious of it or not, in order to engage each other and enter into conversation in the first place. Specifically, both sides, despite their differing interpretations, deploy and leverage a particular understanding of the real. In fact, these discussions of and debates about computer-mediated social interaction throw around the words 'real' and 'reality' with relative ease. They not only distinguish the endlessly reconfigurable designer bodies of avatars from the real person who stands behind it and manipulates the

digital strings but, when push comes to shove, when things in the virtual environment get confused or exceedingly complicated, advocates and critics alike often appeal to the relatively safe and well-defined world of what is now called in a curious recursive, discursive gesture, 'real reality'. Consequently, what is needed is an examination of the common understanding of the 'real' that has been operationalized in these various discussions and disputes. The objective of such an investigation is not to engage in philosophical speculation about the nature of reality. The goal, rather, is to get real about computer-generated experience and social interaction, providing this relatively new area of study with a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of some of its own key terms and fundamental concepts.

Will the Real Please Stand Up?

Let's begin at the beginning – at that point when the avatar is first recognized as a significant social issue. Although there is some debate about the exact point of entry, one text has been routinely credited as the source, Sandy Stone's 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?' This essay, which was initially presented at the First International Conference on Cyberspace (4–5 May 1990, University of Texas at Austin), investigated the new opportunities and challenges introduced by the nascent virtual communities that had developed in bulletin board systems (BBS) and first-generation computer conferencing services like CompuServ. In the course of her analysis, Stone introduces readers to Julie, 'a person on a computer conference in New York in 1985' (Stone, 1991: 82). Julie, as Stone describes her, was a severely disabled woman who compensated for her physical limitations by engaging in rather intimate conversations online. She was a gregarious woman who, despite being trapped in a ruined physical body, was able to carry on a full and very active social life in cyberspace. The only problem, as Stone eventually points out, was Julie did not really exist. She was, in fact, the avatar of a rather shy and introverted middle-aged male psychiatrist who decided to experiment with online identity and what Stone (1991: 84) called 'computer cross-dressing'. The case of Julie, therefore, was not just one of the earliest recorded accounts of avatar identity crisis but introduced what is widely considered to be one of the principal issues concerning online social interaction – the difference between avatar appearance and the true identity of the real person behind the scene/screen. The full impact of this is perhaps best articulated by Kim Randall on a blog, which documents her experiences in *Second Life*. 'How does one know', Randall (2008) inquires, 'what is truth and reality when dealing, playing and working in a virtual world? The reason I am writing this is due to the fact that at some point we all question someone's honesty when in all reality you cannot see the person, only the avatar of someone you may talk to or work with in a virtual world.' Randall's inquiry is direct, intuitive and seemingly very simple. Responding to it, however, will entail an engagement with a whole lot of metaphysics. Rather than engage this material directly, we can get at it by following the trail of Stone's evocative title – 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?'

This title alludes to a popular television game show. The show, *To Tell the Truth*, was created by Bob Stewart, produced by the highly successful production team of Mark Goodson and Bill Todman and ran intermittently on several US television networks since

its premier in the mid-1950s. *To Tell the Truth* was a panel show, which like its precursor *What's My Line?* (1950–67), featured a panel of four celebrities who were confronted with a group of three individuals or challengers. Each challenger claimed to be one particular individual who had some unusual background, notable life experience, or unique occupation. The celebrity panel was charged with interrogating the trio and deciding, based on the responses to their questions, which one of the three was actually the person she or he purported to be – who, in effect, was telling the truth? In this exchange, two of the challengers engaged in deliberate deception, answering the questions of the celebrity panel by pretending to be someone they were not, while the remaining challenger told the truth. The ‘moment of truth’ came at the game’s conclusion, when the program’s host asked the pivotal question, ‘Will the real so-and-so please stand up?’ at which time one of the three challengers stood up. In doing so, this one individual revealed him/herself as the real thing and exposed the other two as imposters.

Although ostensibly a form of simple entertainment, *To Tell the Truth* is based on and stages some of the fundamental concerns of western metaphysics. First, it differentiates and distinguishes between the real thing and its phenomenal appearances. According to the program’s structure, the real thing is not only obscured by what appears and is presented to the panel, but it is situated just below, behind, or outside the surface of these apparitions. Consequently, there is a real thing. It is, however, hidden or concealed by various competing and somewhat unreliable appearances. Second, in the face of these different apparitions, the panelists attempt to ascertain what is real by interrogating the appearances and looking for significant inconsistencies, incongruities and even betrayals within phenomenal reality. The panelists, therefore, scrutinize the appearances in order to determine, by a kind of process of elimination, what is real and what is not. Third, the effectiveness of this particular undertaking can be evaluated by comparing each panelist’s final judgment to the real thing. This means that the panelists will, at some point in the program, have access to the real itself. At some point, then, namely at the end of the program, the real thing can be made to stand up, to show itself as itself, so that one may have direct and unmitigated access to it. Finally, once the real thing is revealed, the four panelists (and the viewing audience) will know which appearances were truthful and which were false. They will come to know who among the challengers had been telling the truth and who was lying, who among the four panelists judged correctly and who did not, and, most importantly, what is real and what is merely an illusory deception and fiction.

This is, as any student of philosophy will recognize, the basic configuration typically attributed to Platonic metaphysics. For mainstream Platonism, the real is situated outside of and beyond phenomenal reality. That is, the real things are located in the realm of supersensible ideas and what is perceived by embodied and finite human beings are derived and somewhat deficient apparitions. This Platonic arrangement, although well over 2400 years old, also informs and is operative in recent debates about avatars and user identity. First, we commonly distinguish the appearances of avatars that populate the computer-generated environment from the true identity of the user. Avatars, as users, developers and researchers recognize, are ‘representational proxies that may or may not reflect the physical attributes of their controllers’ (Lastowka and Hunter, 2006: 15). There is then, as Thomas Boellstorff (2008: 120) describes it, a ‘gap between virtual and

actual self' and 'a broadly shared cultural assumption that virtual selfhood is not identical to actual selfhood' (p. 119). This 'broadly shared cultural assumption' is visually exhibited in Robbie Cooper's *Alter Ego* (2007), a book of 70 composite portraits that picture computer gamers from the US, Europe, China and Japan alongside images of their avatars, 'graphically dramatizing', as it states on the book's back cover, 'the gap between fantasy and reality'. Although this exhibition is entirely in line with the formal structure of Platonism, there is, it is important to note, something of a revision of the original material. For Platonism, the real thing was determined to be the supersensible ideas, and what confronted finite and embodied human beings through the means of the senses was considered an insubstantial apparition and shadowy representation (Plato, 1987). For CMC researchers and participants, however, the terms are inverted. The real things are, following post-Enlightenment innovations in epistemology and the empirical methodology patronized by modern science, assumed to be the physical world and the actual objects and people inhabiting it. The appearances, by contrast, are the insubstantial and manifold representations of these things, which are projected into and simulated by the computer-generated environment.

Second, in order for this ontological difference, as philosophers call it, to show itself as such, one would need access not just to the appearance of something but to the real thing as it is in itself. In other words, the appearance is only able to be recognized as such and to show itself as an appearance on the basis of some knowledge of the real thing. Although this sounds a bit abstract, it can be easily explicated, as Slavoj Žižek (2002) has so often demonstrated in his own work, by way of a joke. In a now well-known and often reproduced *New Yorker* cartoon by Peter Steiner (1993), two dogs sit in front of an Internet-connected PC. The one operating the computer says to his companion, 'On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.' The cartoon has often been employed to illustrate the problems of identity and anonymity in CMC. As Richard Holeton (1998: 111) interprets it, 'the cartoon makes fun of the anonymity of network communications by showing a dog online, presumably fooling some credulous humans about its true identity'. The cartoon, however, is only comical on the basis of a crucial and necessary piece of information – we see that it is really a dog behind the computer screen and keyboard. Without access to this information, the cartoon would not work; it would not make sense.

Access to this 'real thing' can be, as the game shows of Goodson and Todman demonstrate, provided in one of two ways. On the one hand, the real may be revealed *a priori* as is the case with *What's My Line?*, Goodson and Todman's initial panel show. In *What's My Line?*, four celebrity panelists interrogated one challenger in an attempt to ascertain this particular individual's occupation or line of work. Although the true identity of the challenger was concealed from the celebrity panel, it was revealed to both the studio and television audience in advance of the start of game play. In this situation, then, the real thing would have been available prior to the subsequent involvement with its various appearances. This is the approach that is typically operative with social networking applications like Facebook, MySpace and instant messenger (IM), which are often utilized by university students to maintain contact with friends and acquaintances. Since users of these communication technologies, as Nakamura (2007: 49) points out, 'already know the identities of their interlocutors', they are able to evaluate whether their friend's avatar, a Facebook profile or an IM screen name, is an accurate portrayal of the real

person or not. On the other hand, access to the real can be situated *a posteriori*, as is demonstrated in *To Tell the Truth*. In this situation, the real is made available and exposed as such only after a considerable engagement with appearances. This is the experience commonly reported by Internet users who initiate contact online and then endeavor to meet each other face-to-face (F2F) in real life (RL). The outcome of such RL meetings is either pleasantly surprising, as one comes to realize that the real person is pretty much what one had expected, or terribly disturbing, as it becomes clear that the real person is nothing like he or she pretended to be. The former is evident, for example, in the marketing campaigns of next-gen computer-dating services like e-Harmony.com and Match.com. While the latter has gained considerable popularity in press coverage of police sting operations, where law enforcement agents, posing as underage minors online, arrange RL rendezvous with sexual predators, scam artists and pedophiles. Whether access is provided *a priori* or *a posteriori*, knowledge of the real as it is in itself is essential for distinguishing and evaluating avatar identity.

Critical Complications

Differentiating between the real thing and its multifaceted appearances is clearly an effective and useful method for negotiating, as Sherry Turkle (1995) calls it, 'identity in the age of the Internet'. This essentially Platonic configuration, however, is not beyond critique and there are, it turns out, good reasons to be skeptical of the precedent it imposes on our thinking. Such critical perspective has been advanced by Immanuel Kant, the progenitor of 'critical philosophy' and the individual who, according to Žižek (2001: 160), occupies a unique pivotal position in the history of western thought. Kant (1965: B xxvii), following the Platonic precedent, differentiates between the object as it appears to us – finite and embodied human beings – through the mediation of our senses and the thing as it is in-itself. Human beings are restricted to the former, while the latter remains, for us at least, forever unapproachable. 'What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us. We know nothing but our mode of perceiving them' (Kant, 1965: A 42/B 59). Despite the complete and absolute inaccessibility of the thing itself, Kant (1965) still 'believes' in its existence: 'But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely that though we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as *things* in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearances without anything that appears' (Kant, 1965: B xxvi). Consequently, Kant redeploys the Platonic distinction between the real thing and its appearances, adding the further qualification that access to the real thing is, if we are absolutely careful in defining the proper use and limits of our cognitive abilities, forever restricted and beyond us.

It follows from this that if Kant's critical philosophy had been employed in the design of *To Tell the Truth*, the game show would have been pretty much the same with one crucial difference. There would be a celebrity panel, who seek to know the truth through interrogation, and three challengers, who present this panel with various and competing appearances. At the moment of truth, however, the final gesture would be truncated.

When the host asks the question ‘will the real so-and-so please stand up?’ no one would respond; none of the challenges would stand and be recognized as the real thing. Instead, the panel and the audience would be confronted with the fact that finite human beings are unable to know the thing as it truly is in itself. This does not mean, however, that there is no real thing. He/she/it would in fact exist, and Kant would be the first to insist upon it. He would, however, be just as strict on insisting that this real thing, whatever it really is, cannot be made to appear before us in phenomenal reality under the revealing lights of the television studio. It, whatever it is, remains forever off screen, perhaps just outside the frame of televisual phenomena, behind the curtain of the studio set, or held in the green room down the hall. The Kantian version of the game, therefore, would probably end with a distinctly Kantian admonishment. Something like, ‘Remember folks, what you see here is all you get. Going further would be a violation of the proper use of our reason. Good night and see you next week.’ Although perfectly consistent with the stipulations of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, such a program would not last very long, mainly because we would not get the final revelation and pay-off. We would, in effect, be forever denied and barred from the ‘the money shot’.

This Kantian reconfiguration provides for a much more attentive consideration of avatar identity and computer-mediated social interaction. Although it is commonly understood that an avatar often exhibits characteristics that may not be anything like the real person who created and controls it, direct and unmediated access to the real thing behind the avatar is in many cases impractical and effectively inaccessible. This does not mean, however, that there is no real human user behind the avatar; it just means that one’s access to this real thing is itself something that may not ever be realized or ascertained as such. As one participant in Boellstorff’s empirical study of role playing games aptly described it, ‘you never really know who is on the other side of the mask’ (Boellstorff’s, 2008: 130). Kant, therefore, appears to understand the predicament of the avatar much better than his Platonic predecessor, and this is borne out by documented accounts of online identity crisis. If we consider, for instance, the details of Stone’s account, it is evident that Julie’s true identity was not ascertained by gaining access to the real person behind the avatar. Neither Stone nor the other users of the CMC system had ever met the real male psychiatrist who presumably created and controlled this avatar. Instead Julie’s identity began to unravel due to the rather slow accumulation, within the space of the virtual environment, of obvious inconsistencies and seemingly irreconcilable contradictions. The appearance of Julie, therefore, eventually betrayed itself as nothing more than a mere appearance by getting tripped up in the material of its own apparition. And at some point the ‘real person’ behind Julie, an individual Stone (1995: 69) later identifies as ‘Sanford Lewin’, apparently decided to end the charade and reveal himself as such. In providing this revelation, which it should be noted occurred within the space and time of the computer conference, Lewin finally unmasked Julie as a construct and came out to her online friends as a cross-dressing psychiatrist. But here is where things get exceedingly complicated, because this seemingly fantastic tale is itself something of a fabrication. As Stone (1995) notes, her account of the Julie incident was based on an earlier publication, Lindsay Van Gelder’s ‘The Strange Case of the Electronic Woman’, which was first published in *Ms.* magazine in 1985. In retelling the story, Stone had not only taken some liberties with the narrative but even altered the names of the participants.

‘When I first wrote up my version of the incident’, Stone (1995: 191) explained, ‘I used a pseudonym for the psychiatrist, and although Van Gelder used his “real” (legal) name, I have retained the pseudonym in this version because my treatment of him is quasifictional.’ So even in Stone’s text, at the point at which the real person behind Julie (which it turns out was also a pseudonym – the name reported in the original Van Gelder article was ‘Joan Sue Green’) would be identified, we do not get the real thing as it is in itself; we get another fabrication and apparition. The thing-in-itself, therefore, appears to be logically necessary but fundamentally inaccessible and endlessly deferred.

The Parallax View

Kant’s critical perspective, although providing for a more nuanced understanding of the situation, is not immune to critique. G.W.F. Hegel, for example, finds Kant’s arguments to be unsatisfactory, but not for the obvious reasons. What Hegel objects to is not the characteristic Kantian modesty, that is, the Prussian philosopher’s seemingly stubborn insistence on the fundamental limitations of human knowledge and its absolute inability to achieve access to the thing-in-itself in its unclothed nakedness. Instead Hegel criticizes Kant for pulling punches, for not taking his own innovations and insights far enough. ‘It is Kant,’ Žižek (2006: 27) writes, ‘who goes only halfway in his destruction of metaphysics, still maintaining the reference to the Thing-in-itself as the externally inaccessible entity; Hegel is merely a radicalized Kant, who takes the step from negative access to the Absolute to the Absolute itself as negativity.’ According to Žižek’s reading, what Hegel finds unsatisfactory is the fact that the Kantian philosophical revolution remains incomplete and unfulfilled. For Kant, the thing-in-itself, although forever inaccessible to finite human beings, is still thought of as a positive, substantive thing. Hegel finds this both inadequate and inconsistent. He therefore criticizes Kant not for insisting on the necessarily limited capacity of human knowledge or the fundamental inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself, but for wrongly presupposing that the thing-in-itself is some positive, substantive thing and missing the fact that this thing is itself ‘nothing but the inherent limitation of the intuited phenomena’ (Žižek, 1993: 39). ‘Where Kant thinks that he is still dealing only with a negative presentation of the Thing, we are already in the midst of the Thing-in-itself – *for this Thing-in-itself is nothing but this radical negativity*. In other words – in a somewhat overused Hegelian speculative twist – the negative experience of the Thing must change into the experience of the Thing-in-itself as radical negativity’ (Žižek, 1989: 205–6).

This Hegelian elaboration results in a much more complex conceptualization of the real. ‘The Real,’ Žižek explains, ‘is *simultaneously* the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing. More precisely, the Real is ultimately the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second’ (2003: 77, emphasis in original). For Žižek (2006: 26), then, the Real is ‘purely parallaxtic’. From one angle it is perceived as the Thing to which direct access is not possible – a kind of Kantian thing-in-itself. ‘On a second approach, however, we should merely take note of how this radical antinomy that seems to preclude our access to the Thing *is already the*

Thing itself' (Žižek, 2003: 77). This changes not so much the structure but the outcome of the game. In what would be a Žižekian remake of *To Tell the Truth*, things would begin and proceed with little or no significant alteration. A celebrity panel would confront and interrogate three challengers, all of whom would make competing claims to be the real thing. The truth of the matter would, as in the Goodson/Todman production, be withheld. And because of this, the panel can only attempt to gain access to the real through an engagement with the manifold and often conflicting appearances provided by the three challengers. The real difference becomes evident at the game's end, when the real thing is asked to stand up and reveal itself as such. Here, as in the Kantian version, we do not get the naive gratification of the Real making a final and revealing appearance in phenomenal reality. No one stands up. The difference – the 'minimal difference', as Žižek (2006: 11) often calls it – comes immediately after or alongside this apparent failure or lack of resolution. The Žižekian game, unlike the Kantian version, would not conclude with a rather unsatisfactory and somewhat disappointing admonishment. In order for the game's ending to be construed in this way, we would need, like Kant, to presuppose and place value in the positive existence of the thing itself. We would still need to believe and have faith in the thing-in-itself. Žižek's version, however, would insist on 'tarrying with the negative', with the fact that this apparent lack of resolution is itself a resolution. Or to put it another way, at the end of the program, when no one stands up, there is no final and absolute revelation of the thing itself. This lack of revelation, however, is itself revealing. Through it, we come to see that the so-called real thing, which had been presupposed from the beginning of the program and that had directed its development, is a kind of posed or posited fiction. 'This unique procedure,' Žižek (2008a: xxxv) writes in a passage that appears to address itself to the operations of the game show, 'is the opposite of the standard revelation of the illusory status of (what we previously misperceived as) part of reality: what is thereby asserted is rather, in a paradoxical tautological move, *the illusory status of the illusion itself* – the illusion that there is some suprasensible noumenal Entity is shown precisely to be an "illusion", a fleeting apparition.' Consequently, what is revealed in the Žižekian remake of the game is not a real thing standing above, behind, or outside of the play of appearances and comprehending everything. What is revealed is that this very expectation – an expectation that has been inherited from Plato and that has, since that time, held an important and controlling interest in western intellectual history – is itself a metaphysical fantasy and fabrication.

This will obviously reorient the way we approach and understand online interaction, avatar identity and, especially, the relationship that has customarily been situated between the so-called 'real world' and its apparitional others. The real thing in computer-mediated experience has been, following the tradition and standard protocols of Platonism, the presumed hard kernel that both resists and exists outside the seemingly endless circulation of virtual images, digital appearances and mediated representations. This is, as we have seen, a deep-seated assumption informing both the rhetoric and logic of computer-mediated experience in general and social interaction in particular. Avatars, for instance, are presumed to be the virtual proxy and delegate of a real person (Apter, 2008; Little, 1999) who sits behind the screen and controls the apparent action. 'While the more fundamental personality of the real person is still driving in the background,' Boellstorff (2008: 132) writes, 'it's filtered through a different surface persona.' The real thing,

therefore, is thought to be the actual person who exists outside the virtual environment and substantiates the apparent vicissitudes of identity that are represented by different avatar configurations. At the same time, however, this apparently fundamental and substantial thing, if we are absolutely strict in our understanding of the situation and its proper epistemological restrictions, turns out to be entirely virtual. That is, the presumed 'real person' is, as Žižek argues, a retroactively reconstructed virtuality that is fashioned out of what was thought to be derivative and subsequent appearances. Understood in this way, the avatars that are encountered within the virtual world are not the representatives and delegates of some independent and pre-existing real thing. The order of precedence must be reversed. 'The multiple perspectival inconsistencies between phenomena', as Žižek (2008a: xxix–xxx) puts it, 'are not an effect of the impact of the transcendental Thing – on the contrary, the Thing is nothing but the ontologization of the inconsistency between phenomena.'

This is precisely what is documented in Stone's seminal 'boundary story'. 'Sanford Lewin', as Stone (1991) pointed out, was not strictly speaking a real person. He was the ontologization of inconsistencies that began to appear within the fabric of the virtual environment and the account that Stone herself provided about this event. For this reason, if we could ever peek behind the scenes or the screen, what we would encounter is not the real thing with its pants down. We would only discover, as Žižek (2008a: liv) writes with reference to a passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'only what we put there'. Consequently, when the decisive question – 'Will the real body please stand up?' – is asked, what we get is not necessarily what was expected or wanted. What comes to be revealed is neither the thing-in-itself available to us in some unmitigated immediacy nor the Kantian-brand disappointment that is experienced in the face of a fundamental inability to expose the real as such. Instead, what is revealed is the lack of this kind of revelation and the way such expectations and assumptions are always and already misguided and fantastic. Perhaps the best and most obvious illustration of all this comes not from the field of CMC but from the recent collapse of the world's financial institutions. The value of our money, say a single US dollar, resides not in the ink and paper of the note that is carried in our wallets and purses. The note is just a proxy or delegate – a virtual stand-in for something else. The real value of our money is, so it has been assumed, established by and resides in the global financial markets. What the collapse of these markets demonstrates, then, is that this presumed real thing is itself something entirely apparitional and constitutes what is, quite literally in this case, a virtual reality. In late 2008, if you asked the question 'will the real money please stand up?', what was revealed was not the real thing in itself. What was revealed was the always and already illusory status of our very real investment in this particular understanding and conceptualization of the real.

Keeping it Real

On the morning of 9 April 2008, I was, by virtue of one of my *Second Life* avatars, spending some time on my university's island. While wandering around the computer-simulated buildings and meticulously reproduced landscape of our virtual campus, I noticed two

other avatars playing in the sandbox and discussing the features of a rather large automobile-like object. Since they were conversing in Polish, I approached and greeted them with the standard casual salutation: 'Cześć, jak się masz?', which is something like the English 'Hey, how's it going?' In response to this, one of the avatars turned and said to me in a curious and telling mash-up of Polish and English, 'Cześć, keeping it real.' This reply requires at least two comments. First, the American slang 'keeping it real' connotes authenticity and the lack of any form of artifice. As a linguistic token, however, the phrase must, it seems, be delivered in its assumed original form, that is, in English and not translated into another language, like Polish. This has been done, it appears, in order to deliver this statement about authenticity with a certain authenticity. In other words, what is conveyed by the phrase 'keeping it real' would not be truly real unless it was delivered in a way that was authentic and was itself 'keeping it real'. In providing his response in English, therefore, the avatar was 'keeping it real' in both word and deed. But, and this is the second point, what would it mean for an avatar to be 'keeping it real'? What does 'keeping it real' mean when spoken or keyed by a virtual construct in an artificial, computer-generated environment like *Second Life*? Is this ironic? Is it a contradiction? Or is it one of those unfortunate moments, as comedian Dave Chappell has described it, 'when keeping it real goes wrong?' Let me, therefore, conclude by noting three consequences of 'keeping it real' in computer-mediated social interaction.

First, everything depends on how we define and operationalize the concept of the real. Even though online role playing games, social networks and other forms of avatar-based CMC are often considered to be merely a matter of entertainment, they are involved in serious debates about and meditations on fundamental aspects of metaphysics. And in these situations there appears to be, as there are in many facets of computing, a default setting. This default has been programmed and is controlled by Platonism, which institutes a distinction between the real thing and its phenomenal appearances. In computer-mediated interaction, like online role playing games and immersive social environments, this Platonic decision is particularly manifest in the discussions and debates surrounding avatar identity and the seemingly indisputable fact that what appears in the space of the virtual world are manipulated representations of real human users, who may themselves be entirely different from how they appear in the computer-generated environment. As long as our research endeavors remain within and proceed according to this Platonic formulation, which as a default setting is often operative without having to select or specify it, we already know what questions matter, what evidence will count as appropriate and what outcomes will be acceptable. This rather comfortable and well-established theoretical position, however, comes to be disturbed by the critical interventions of Kant, who it appears is much more perceptive about the facts on the ground. Kant reaffirms the Platonic distinction between the real thing as it is in itself and its various mediated apparitions that appear within phenomenal reality. But unlike the Platonist, Kant harbors considerable doubt as to whether this real thing is ever accessible as it truly is in itself. This does not mean, however, that Kant simply denies the existence of the real; he is just agnostic about it. That is, he sticks to his methodological guns and stubbornly refuses to admit knowing anything about something that remains, by definition, fundamentally inaccessible and out of reach. On the Kantian account, therefore, it is assumed that there is a real person behind the avatar, but because these online applications now have a global reach, it seems rather improbable that

one would ever have unmitigated access to the real person behind the scene/screen. Žižek, who finds this Kantian innovation to be a crucial turning point, takes things one step further. Following the Hegelian critique of Kant's critical philosophy, Žižek transforms the Kantian negative experience of the thing-in-itself into the experience of the thing-in-itself as radical negativity. For Žižek, then, the real is already a virtual construct, and the difference between the real and the virtual turns out to be much more complicated and interesting. Consequently, 'it is not', as Boellstorff (2008: 5) concludes, 'that virtual worlds borrowed assumptions from real life: virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our "real" lives have been "virtual" all along'.

Second, in the face of these three competing theories of the real, one might understandably ask which is true. Or to put it in the parlance of the game show, one could ask of the three contestants, will the real real please stand up? This inquiry, although informed by what appears to be good common sense, is already a loaded question insofar as it employs and relies upon the very thing that is asked about. Žižek's understanding of the real stands out insofar as it comprehends and complicates this inquiry. 'The "truth",' Žižek (2003: 79) writes, 'is not the "real" state of things, that is, the "direct" view of the object without perspectival distortion, but the very Real of the antagonism that causes perspectival distortion. The site of truth is not the way "things really are in themselves", beyond their perspectival distortions, but the very gap, passage, that separates one perspective from another, the gap that makes the two perspectives radically incommensurable. . . . There is a truth; everything is not relative – but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortion as such, not the truth distorted by the partial view of a one-sided perspective.' For Žižek, then, truth no longer resides in what is assumed to be the 'real state of things'. On his account, this kind of direct and undistorted access to the real, which is one of the standard operating presumptions of both *To Tell the Truth* and *What's My Line?*, has been and remains a mere metaphysical game. Instead truth, according to Žižek's reconceptualization of the real, must be characterized according to what Hegel calls 'speculative reason'. For Hegel, 'speculative' is not, as is typically the case in colloquial discourse, a pejorative term meaning groundless consideration or idle review of something that is often inconclusive and indeterminate. Instead, Hegel understands and utilizes the word 'speculative' in its strict etymological sense, which is derived from the Latin noun *speculum*. 'Speculative', therefore, designates a form of self-reflective knowing. For Žižek in particular, this means explicitly recognizing the way what comes to be enunciated is always and already conditioned by the situation or place of enunciation. 'At the level of positive knowledge,' Žižek (2008b: 3) writes, 'it is, of course, never possible to (be sure that we have) attain(ed) the truth – one can only endlessly approach it, because language is ultimately self-referential, there is no way to draw a definitive line of separation between sophism, sophistic exercises, and Truth itself (this is Plato's problem). Lacan's wager is here the Pascalian one: the wager of Truth. But how? Not by running after "objective" truth, but by holding onto the truth about the position from which one speaks.' The strategic advantage of this particular approach, then, is not that it provides one with privileged and immediate access to the object in its raw or naked state but that it continuously conceptualizes the place from which one claims to know anything and submits to investigation the particular position that is occupied by any epistemological claim whatsoever.

Finally, what this means for the study of avatars and computer-mediated social interaction is an end to a certain brand of theoretical naivety. The choice of theory, especially a theory of the real, which is always at play and operationalized in considerations of virtual environments, is never certain and is always open to considerable variation and debate. But the choice is always a choice (even in those circumstances where one operates according to the default setting and is not conscious of having made a decision), and it needs to be explicitly understood and articulated as such. This is necessary, because a decision concerning theory already and in advance determines the kinds of questions one asks, the evidence one believes will count as appropriate and the range of solutions that are recognized as possible. The English word 'theory', as we are often reminded, is derived from the ancient Greek *theōrein*, which denotes the act of seeing or vision. A theory, therefore, like the frame of a camera, always enables something to be seen by including it within the field of vision, but it also and necessarily excludes other things outside the edge of its frame. We can, for instance, justifiably employ the default Platonic conceptualization, and it will, in many circumstances, prove to be entirely serviceable. This is, for example, the current situation in many of the discussions of avatar identity, where researchers affirm (with little or no critical hesitation) the fact that 'users can', as Taylor (2006: 95) describes it, 'construct identities that may or may not correlate to their offline persona'. This ability to manipulate and reconfigure one's identity has been either celebrated as a significant advantage and gain for the real people who use the technology, or it is criticized for the way it facilitates deception, antisocial behavior and problematic forms of identity tourism. What the two sides of this debate share, despite their many differences, is an underlying belief in and dedication to the real, specifically, the real person who, it is assumed, exists behind the avatar in the so-called 'real world'. As Stone (1991: 111) emphatically reminds us, 'no matter how virtual the subject may become, there is always a body attached'. This essentially Platonic arrangement, even though it is put in question and significantly complicated by both the Kantian critical perspective and Žižek's recent innovations in the ontology of the real, works in this admittedly limited context. Like Newtonian physics, which, although superceded by Einstein's work in relativity, is still entirely serviceable for calculating load and stress in structural engineering, there are some areas in which the Platonic theory of the real is entirely appropriate and applicable. Its employment, however, must be understood to be limited to a highly constrained context and not something that can be, on the basis of this particular success, generalized beyond this specific situation to cover each and every circumstance. Consequently, we must explicitly recognize that this particular application of theory, like the choice of any tool or instrument, cannot be unconsciously accepted as merely given, somehow natural and beyond critical self-reflection. In other words, we need to understand, as Žižek puts it, how the position of enunciation already influences and informs what comes to be enunciated. What the Žižekian perspective provides, therefore, is not the one true understanding of the real, but a conceptualization of the real that realizes that the real is itself something which is open to considerable variability, ideological pressures and some messy theoretical negotiations. The real problem, then, is not that investigators of computer-mediated social interaction have used one theory of the real or another. The problem is that researchers have more often than not utilized theory without explicitly recognizing which one or considering why one comes to be employed as

opposed to another. For this reason, the real problem with virtual environments and online social interaction is not, as it is so often assumed, a matter of our understanding or misunderstanding of the virtual. The real problem has to do with the real.

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