THEORIZING
DIGITAL
CULTURES

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IDENTITIES AND PERFORMANCES

This chapter explores the performance of personal identity online. I argue that identity online is not a fluid, flexible thing – as many have claimed about online identity throughout the past several decades – but relies on how the materiality of a medium permits identity to be performed. After reviewing more general theories of identity and performance, this chapter examines the history of online identities through text-based and graphical environments, along with more recent kinds of identity performances found in online games and social media platforms.

TERMS: avatars; essentialism and anti-essentialism; interpellation; subject position

THEORISTS: Louis Althusser, Karen Barad, Gilles Deleuze, Erving Goffman, Alice Marwick, Theresa Senft, Allucquère Rosanne Stone, Sherry Turkle

EXAMPLES: anonymity in blogging; LambdaMOO; Lucasfilm's *Habitat*; *Rust*; service work; *Snow Crash's* Metaverse

Digital media – particularly online, networked media – are regularly linked with transformations in how we understand personal identity. Some of the earliest work that paid serious attention to digital media argued that online interaction was the realization of a more flexible, fluid identity. Identity was not inherently linked to the biology of the human body, but to the play of textual identities, multiple personalities, and active self-creation via the construction of avatars. Recent discussions of identity online, however, have called into question these arguments from the 1980s and 1990s. Identity online is not inherently fluid anymore – if it ever was – because of the role of digital surveillance and the political economy of social media. Social media platforms regularly demand that you have one identity rather than multiple ones. Many believe larger threats to online civility and order, such as cyberbullying and trolling, will be rectified by forcing people to use real names, guaranteeing consequences offline for actions taken online. In light of this, one of the questions digital culture implores us to ask is 'what is identity'?

Bringing together a number of the concepts and concerns we've introduced thus far, this chapter reviews the different ways we conceptualize identity online, arguing that the materiality of technology constrains how we interact, and, in the process, produces the possibilities for bodies, their differences, their relations, and, crucially, *how they come to matter to and for each other* (Barad 2007: 143, 180). Our identities and bodies are quite literally shaped by the material and technical means we have for recording information and communicating. This does not mean that we are nothing other than our data, or that we do not exist outside the technologies we use. But it does mean that our sense of self and our physical sense of embodiment are both shaped by the media we use. Our identities are reimagined according to how media permit our bodies to interact.

This chapter covers a general history of online identity, from text-based virtual worlds to social media, reviewing concepts we have for understanding identity online. It demonstrates how our identities are shaped by the physical capacities of technology, even in the most mundane, everyday interactions online. Throughout this chapter, identity will be linked to, or contrasted with, the fact that humans, as biological, animal beings, *have bodies*. Some of these issues about the body will be bracketed for now. The next chapter continues with the claims proposed in this chapter to investigate more general questions of embodiment, asking how digital media transform the possibilities and limits of the human body.

THE PERFORMANCE OF IDENTITY

Before we discuss online identities, I'd like to think a bit more generally about identity as such. Who are you? How do you come to understand yourself? Is identity about something inside you? About some interior *essence*? Or is identity about what you do? About what is visible to others? About what you *perform*? We've already used this term 'perform' a number of times in this book. In the last chapter we noted how, with cybernetics, interior consciousness doesn't really matter. There is no 'essence' inside you that makes you 'essentially' human, or 'essentially' a man or a woman (or, to use another term, there is no 'ontological stability' to the categories of 'human', or 'man', or 'woman'). Instead, what matters is what is performed. A similar view of identity is taken up by many of those who discuss the social and cultural aspects of digital media. Identity is not what you *are*, but rather is something you *do*. This is a *performative* understanding of identity, contrasted with an **essentialist** understanding of identity. Most theorists of digital media do not place much emphasis on some essential nature that exists inside you. As was the case with cybernetics, what is made visible to others – what is performed and observed – is your identity. The identities you perform may be different depending on context. You appear to others, and that appearance matters.

The relationship between interior states of the mind and exterior relations with others has long been a problem for understanding human psychology and social relationships. We have no real access to the interior states of other people aside from what's made visible and public. Identity, in this case, is not about what you keep to yourself, but about how you present yourself to others. This understanding of identity goes back, at least, to Erving Goffman's classic work of sociology, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). For Goffman, our social world is a drama in which we perform roles and manage the various impressions others have of us. Our identities derive from how we interact and relate, and our ability to perform specific identities depends on the relations in which we find ourselves.

One of the most common examples we can use to explain how we perform our identities comes from work – in particular, service work. You may have worked in a restaurant or café at some point in your life. Think about all of the different ways you present yourself when working at a restaurant. Whenever a server goes out to attend to their customers, entering the 'front of house', they will usually put on a performance of professionalism, elegance, or friendliness. This is especially true in the United States

where these performances are linked to pay through tipping. As well, these performances are themselves shaped by the kind of restaurant in which a person works. A server's performance will be very different if they work at a fine dining restaurant, a family restaurant, or a restaurant that has some sort of theme. Once the server moves from the front of house to the kitchen, or 'back of house', the performance may change. A previously well-mannered server may become angry. They may swear when dealing with line cooks, who may make rude comments. The context has changed, as has how a person presents themselves to others. When a person is alone, the performance may change as well – maybe the server talks to themself in a mirror, for instance.

So what's the real identity here? The well-mannered server, or the angry, swearing one? Or the one alone, at home? Do these parts bleed into one another? Or do we perform a lot of work to make sure they remain separate? How might these performances shift depending on the physical architecture of the restaurant? How might things be different if there's a closed door between the dining room and the kitchen, or if the kitchen is open for the restaurant's guests to look into and observe food being prepared? Let's extend these questions out beyond restaurants. How do you present yourself in the class you're in? What about at home with your parents? What about at a bar or pub with your friends?

The point here is not to say that one of these performances is more 'you' than another. Rather, they're all part of you. We break up and parcel out who we are depending on context, which is about how we encounter others and present ourselves to them. These contexts are shaped by our physical environment and, today, how that environment is permeated with digital media. Differentiating our social roles may be helped by our technologies. But our technologies may also make it more difficult to parcel out these roles. The everyday use of social media, for instance, has often resulted in what Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) refer to as *context collapse*, in which social media erode our ability to maintain the boundaries between contexts, so our parents or bosses see photos of drunken nights out because our Facebook friends may include people we know from any and every context of our lives. While these stories about context collapse regularly characterized discussion of social media, now different platforms are often used to mitigate against context collapse, maintaining the boundaries that were previously marked by different physical spaces. If you use Facebook to talk with your family, make a LinkedIn or Twitter page for class, and use Snapchat to send videos to friends, you're working to make sure context collapse does not happen,

perpetuating a way of performing identity that was first identified by Goffman in the 1950s.

Now, you may think that you perform the same identity in every single situation, not hiding anything from anyone. This is possible, but most of the time we do subtly change how we act because of who we imagine may be watching. Even the most visible celebrity works to keep things out of view. In a world defined by reality TV, social media, and other forms of surveillance, we are often told to be authentic all of the time, to be 'real' in all of our relationships (cf. Andrejevic 2004). But this is, quite simply, not the usual way that people have acted in social relationships.

Many of these roles we play are far more ingrained into who we are than others. The term **subject position** refers to how we inhabit some roles quite deeply as they move from a daily performance to the very founda-tions of how we understand who we are. According to the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, many of the institutions we move through in life, from school, home, work, and the church, along with the various forms of media we use, are dedicated towards teaching us how to behave in specific roles. The goal is not merely to teach proper ways to behave, but to get us to identify with these roles. We are, to use Althusser's term, 'interpellated' into a specific subject position. For Althusser, **interpellation** works quite simply. It's like someone yelling at us, *hailing* us with the statement, 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser 2001: 118).

This is, for Althusser, how various institutions work as well, and it is central for how power and social control operate. We obey because we *recognize ourselves* as fulfilling a specific social role. As a student in class, you are hailed into the role of student, a role you presumably embrace as really you, even if you may not think that the subject position of 'student' defines who you are. But you nonetheless act as if it does. You walk into the classroom and find your proper location, which is most likely behind one of many small desks or tables, set up to face a blackboard or screen, and not behind the desk or table at the front of the room. Your participation in the class perpetuates the performance of your role as student, rather than that of another role, such as that of teacher. At the same time, there are various institutions and techniques in place to make sure you know your role. You are given assignments, which you have to complete and submit to your teacher. Your teacher, likewise, performs their role in assigning work, marking it, giving feedback, and so on. You could argue that the entire sys-tem of university education is focused around teaching and enforcing spe-cific performances of identity. Imagine if any one of these roles ceased to be performed properly. What would happen? What would it be like if you

stopped having assignments that were marked for credit? What would your education be like? How would your roles be performed? (I should note, some – not many – universities do not have marked assignments. Getting grades is not a necessary part of a university education.)

Your entire life is filled with roles you are hailed into, be it a child or a parent, a student or a teacher, a man or a woman. All of the various identity categories you can think of are subject positions that you are hailed to embrace, and you may or may not identify with the categories into which you've been hailed. You've learned how a 'man' is supposed to behave, or how a 'woman' is supposed to relate to a 'man'. You know how 'men' are supposed to act towards each other, and what it means to 'properly' appear as a 'man'. You know how 'women' are supposed to act towards other 'women'. I assume you've heard the phrase 'Be a man!' or 'Man up!' before. These statements interpellate a specific, gendered body into being something that is called 'a man', although this is often only defined through an implied negative: certain behaviours are assumed to be inappropriate for a specific subject position. These categories and performances are not inborn, which means the often discriminatory and restrictive relations they perpetuate can be changed. In the case of gender identities, knowing and behaving like a proper 'man' or proper 'woman' perpetuates the system of inequalities referred to as patriarchy. You've learned these things because of school, church, media, and beyond. These institutions teach you how you are supposed to act and relate to others. Yet there is no one proper way of being any identity – or, there is no *essence* to a specific identity. You've been interpellated into these categories, which, if the interpellation has been successful, you identify with and embrace as part of who you are.

'You' are continually identified and called into being 'something' based on how you appear to others and how you relate to other people. Those who do not conform to a specific subject position (or cannot be successfully identified as being 'something') are often considered a threat to the dominant social order, and can be subject to exclusion, prejudice, or violence as a result. This is, according to many queer theorists, one of the reasons that sexualities and relations that deviate from heterosexual norms are considered to be a threat. There's nothing inherently visual that performs sexuality, even though there are many stereotypes that are identified to police the boundaries of, again, 'proper' forms of how sexuality and gender appear (cf. Edelman 1994). Additionally, what these categories mean, along with the proper performance of any specific identity, is historically and cultural specific. What it means to be a 'man' or a 'woman' may be dramatically different in the United States, New Zealand, Germany,

Brazil, Egypt, or Japan, or, for that matter, these identities may differ between different communities that, with the internet, may not be clearly bound by geography. This means that identity categories are political, and changing the acts and behaviours associated with a specific identity, or claiming identities that refuse traditional categories (such as 'nonbinary' or 'asexual'), may be a place for social change. And when identities become ever more rigid (when being 'something' carries with it increasingly specific assumptions), merely having an identity can be a reason for restrictive limitations to be placed on the actions one performs. Having an identity is not intrinsically empowering. Rather, being 'something' means that you're expected to know your role and how that role is supposed to act. Naming an identity is one way of controlling and managing bodies through the definition of how bodies are supposed to act and appear to others.

ONLINE IDENTITIES

One of the strange things about online identities is that, historically, they have allowed people to refuse, question, or otherwise play with the identities that come with their bodies. They seem to challenge many of the ways that institutions hail us into being 'something', and they do so because our physical bodies often disappear from visibility. We get to construct identities based on **avatars**. This leads to a fundamentally different way of understanding how identity is performed, one based less on physical context and the relations we have with others and more on intentional self-creation. As the psychologist Sherry Turkle noted in her foundational *Life on the Screen*, when online, 'The self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times, something that a person experiences when, for example, she wakes up as a lover, makes breakfast as a mother, and drives to work as a lawyer'. Instead, computers and online spaces permit us 'parallel identities, parallel lives' (1995: 14). On the internet, Turkle claims, our performances are not about relatively discrete identities that we shift between as the context varies. We are not hailed into distinct subject positions that change based on the institutions around us. With digital media, something about identity fundamentally changes, something that appears to leave the body behind, in which we perform multiple identities simultaneously.

Of course, technology has *always* had an effect in transforming how we interact and become present to another. Our performances (and thus, our identities) have always been about the materiality of technology and

how it mediates our interactions. In a different context, the philosopher of science Karen Barad has suggested that our relations are always shaped by material apparatuses that 'leave marks' on our bodies (2007: 176). Our modes of interacting and presenting ourselves to each other are, quite literally, framed by the technical and material support we have for relating and communicating. This means that we have to take the technical specificity of human interaction very seriously, as what identity is becomes an effect of how we encounter each other through the varied materialities of mediation we use to communicate and perform identity. Our identities are intrinsically shaped by how technologies permit our bodies to become present to another, through which we can – or cannot – perform identity in specific ways, either permitted or prohibited by the materiality of the device or platform we're using. The internet isn't something that conceals the body. Rather, it permits the body to become visible in specific ways.

Performing Textual Identity

If we take this claim seriously, then many of the arguments Turkle and other early theorists of identity online made about the fluidity and flexibility of online identity should be related to the specific technologies people used to perform their identities. So, we should review how online identity has been theorized in the past, but also emphasize how these historical claims about identity are, in fact, about how a specific technology or platform enabled bodies to appear to others at a specific moment. Many of Turkle's arguments were based on early text-based online worlds, called MUDs or MOOs, acronyms for 'Multi-User Dungeon' and 'MUD Object-Oriented', respectively. Her claims emerged from interviews or observation, often of disparate groups of children, scientists, or students at her home university of MIT. These interviews were first about the use of these early text-based computer programs, and more recently have been about interactions with robots. Turkle has charted how we imagine our own identities based on how we interact with computers, with others over computers, and with artificial intelligences. Who 'we' are depends deeply on *how* we interact and *with what* we are interacting.

For Turkle, computers are 'objects-to-think-with', technologies that provide metaphors for how we imagine who we are and how we relate. In her book *The Second Self* (2005), those Turkle interviewed used the model of a computer to suggest that a single, coherent thing called an identity was an illusion, and that human cognition was equivalent to a distributed

set of computational, algorithmic processes. This belief makes impossible any clear way of saying that there is such a thing as an 'I'. Rather, 'I' am a set of disparate, if overlapping mental processes that interact to produce 'me'. Any coherent sense of an 'I' is an illusion, a side effect of what's happening in the body's (ultimately computational) cognition. As was the case for Norbert Wiener's posthumanism from decades before, consciousness is a side effect that covers over the fact that the human brain operates in a way analogous to a computer. 'A model of mind as multiprocessor leaves you with a "decentralized" self: there is no "me", no "I", no unitary actor', suggests Turkle, 'But theories that deny and "decenter" the "I" challenge most people's day-to-day experience of having one' (2005: 265).

Yet, as she ventured beyond people's personal relationships with computers to relationships they carried out on the internet, Turkle found that these 'decentered' identities characterized how many individuals described most interactions online. People would log on to MUDs and MOOs and perform as different genders and different sexualities, or as different beings completely unlike the human body in front of the computer. In their interviews, these individuals would often suggest to Turkle that their online performances felt more real than their offline bodies. Being able to distribute their identities away from a single, centred 'I' was liberating, and it permitted early users of the internet a more 'real' engagement with the identity they imagined themselves to 'really' be, even if that identity did not appear to conform to their physical, biological body.

However, while Turkle saw in this a decentred, distributed understanding of identity, in which no 'real me' could be stated to exist, her interviewees often assumed an essentialist understanding of identity, in which one's interior essence did not inherently conform to one's performances – or, their body and their performances in daily life would *not* be 'the real me', but a 'real me' would nonetheless exist, hidden underneath one's skin, invisible to others were it not for communication via computers. Online spaces were often suggested to be more real than daily life beyond their computers because of the freedom to let the 'real me' become visible. One of the things Turkle found was that men would regularly perform as women, and women as men, with her interviewees telling her that 'virtual gender-swapping enabled them to understand what it's like to be a person of the other gender' (Turkle 1995: 238). Thus, these online spaces seemingly enabled people to challenge the institutions that they usually faced, their usual interpellations, and to experiment with identity in a way that seemed to leave the biological body behind.

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The theorist of digital media Allucquère Rosanne Stone has been even more explicit in her claims about the potentialities of identity in online spaces than Turkle. For Stone, when people performed identity online, or acted as a different gender, or even had virtual sex while performing a different identity, what was sent over communications infrastructures 'wasn't just information, it was *bodies*' (Stone 1995: 7). According to Stone, bodies are intrinsically bound up in textuality and language, and while the 'real' physical body never disappears, what gets uploaded online and communicated is still a fully present, 'real' part of the physical body sitting behind the screen, even if it may have little to no relation to that body's physical biology. According to Stone, we are textual, and the ways that we textually perform identity online demonstrates how our bodies can extend themselves out through textual prostheses, 'connecting' with others that are long distances away. While we may perform online as someone with an identity that has little to do with our physical biology, our online identities are nonetheless an extension of our physical bodies and are part of the 'real' identity of the person behind the screen.

These claims have been massively influential in any discussion of identity online. For decades, identity online has been thought to be more fluid, more flexible, and a kind of 'distributed' identity that happens as we speak through an avatar or persona we've created, in which the 'real me' has little to do with the physicality of the biological body. Yet these arguments about identity need to be placed into the technical context of early computer gaming and the initial development of MUDs and MOOs, the technologies both Turkle and Stone used to formulate their claims.

Some of the earliest computer games were developed by programmers working at MIT and other ARPANET-connected institutions. Text-based games like *Adventure* (Will Crowther, 1976) and *Zork* (Infocom, 1980) were not merely created for the amusement of these programmers and students. They were experiments derived from early artificial intelligence combined with an attempt to invent digital versions of the popular role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*. These programmers invented the idea of a playable, digital world that was influential for future understandings of both games and so-called 'cyberspace'. The common name attributed to these games today – 'text adventure' (see Montfort 2003: 65–93) – points directly to the way the game itself inscribes information, bodies, and relation through a textual interface.

These early games were designed for single players. MUDs and MOOs transformed these games into multi-user spaces, the most

notable of which was LambdaMOO, founded in late 1990 or early 1991 by Xerox PARC researcher Pavel Curtis. But, even though they were seemingly populated by 'real' people, the spaces, identities, and interactions of MUDs and MOOs were still limited to what could be described textually. As a result of relations mediated through simple textual descriptions and a verb-object input mechanism (called a parser), a body in the game would be almost completely undefined aside from the text users input to describe themselves. LambdaMOO, for instance, allowed for custom gender descriptions, and included in its gender presets the following categories: 'neuter, male, female, either, Spivak, splat, plural, egotistical, royal, and 2nd person'. Considering how some of these genders do not correspond to the human body in any clear way reveals how textuality is central to the identity experiments described by Turkle and Stone. If the physical body only becomes present through text, then the possibilities for embodiment seem to have little to do with the physical human body. Thus, 'embodiment' in these games is consequentially open-ended (if mostly invisible) aside from the registration of bodies through language (and, specifically, typed language) recognized by a computer program.

The flexible and fluid identities described by Turkle and Stone are not an essence of human identity disclosed through technology, but a material effect of how these text-based worlds happen to work. Stone, in particular, has to claim that identity is essentially textual for her arguments about these online spaces to make sense (1995: 41). On the one hand, this is true – much of our identities are entirely derived from what can be written down, stored, and communicated. We often make ourselves visible and legible to others through textual means. But, at the same time, it is a mistake to then completely reduce the body to textuality. Not all forms of media are textual, and the textual inscription of a body is not the precise equivalent to the body. Perhaps more importantly, *textuality is not only about words, but about the materiality of a medium of communication*. When we assume identities online to be fluid, flexible, and in some tentative relationship to the physicality of the biological body, we're making assumptions about identity and embodiment that emerge from how various technologies enable matter to come to matter. Technologies are required for our bodies to perform identity, and these performances only occur through the materially specific channels through which the body becomes present to others.

One of the things that Turkle identified from her research on identities – one that continues to resonate with us today – is that we '*have learned to*

take things at interface value' (1995: 23). As was the case with cybernetics, if something appears and performs as living, we treat it as alive. If something appears and performs as if it has emotions and feelings, then we treat it as if it has emotions and feelings. Turkle saw how people could feel emotions for others based merely on textual description, or confide in (rather poorly made) computer simulations of psychiatrists, or even fall in love with simplistic artificial intelligences called 'bots', which, today, are increasingly prevalent throughout the internet (Bollmer & Rodley 2017; Gehl and Bakardjieva 2017). These AIs today – perhaps most popularly represented in Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her*, where a man falls in love with a Siri-like AI on his mobile phone – are far more developed than the little pieces of text that characterized online interaction in LambdaMOO. And yet, then, as now, we approach others and value them based on their performances. What matters is not some interior essence, but performances and projections, our willingness to believe that performances are real or authentic, and that visible evidence for intelligence, emotion, and creativity is good enough.

In her early work, Turkle was somewhat positive about the potentials revealed by computers and the internet. In recent years, however, the problem of taking things at interface value has greatly disturbed her. This cybernetic understanding of identity has led to people preferring the company of robots and artificial intelligences to other people. As a fifteen-year-old interviewee informed her, 'People' are 'risky', while robots are 'safe' (Turkle 2011: 51). Turkle now fears that we're replacing humans with simulations because dealing with the emotional complexity and unknowability of the inner lives of others is difficult and often painful. Robots and AIs, programmable as they are, are easier to deal with than other humans. At the same time, having an emotional, intimate relationship with another can be intensely fulfilling – but the ups cannot be separated from the downs. The pain and joy of being close to another human being requires an openness, an openness that involves losing some control over one's own body (as emotions and feelings are about the body, after all) in favour of making a world with another, in which togetherness involves uncertainty, unpredictability, and the difficulties of dealing with people who have their own desires and wills that may not coincide with our own. As we've grown used to accepting performances as evidence, performances that often abstract or reduce the body in any number of ways, are we somehow forgetting something about our relations with other people, replacing them with software that can be easily programmed and manipulated? Are we

preferring predictability and control, desiring devices that can easily bend to our own will?

While I think Turkle's fears are completely justified, the materiality of communication has *always* influenced how we interact, and, I think we can argue, we've always taken things at interface value. We assume the words we read in a hand-written letter are sincere, even though we may have little evidence to support our beliefs. We assume them to be written by the real person who signs the letter, rather than a forgery. We assume that the voices we hear on the telephone are capable of communicating 'real' emotions to us, even though the body only becomes present through sound that is, in all honesty, of rather poor quality. We assume that the tears from another's eye are truthful, although we have little way of actually knowing if they are heartfelt or false. It's true that, in reducing the body through technology, we can mistake software for a human being, as is the case when people have lengthy conversations with bots. Perhaps the grounds upon which we evaluate these changes should not defer to questions about presence or the 'fullness' of specific relations and experiences compared to other relations and experiences that seem to be 'degraded' or 'incomplete'. Perhaps what's at stake is the need for a different set of terms for evaluating the ethics and politics of human relations when we relate to each other primarily through technology.

Avatars and Visual Identity

Of course, our online worlds are no longer merely textual. We have complex **avatars** designed to mimic the human body, and yet expand its possibilities in ways that may appear to mirror the potentials given by textual description in LambdaMOO. An avatar is an online representation of a human user. The term is derived from the Sanskrit word for the physical incarnation of a Hindu god, *avatāra*, which translates as 'descent'. It was first used to describe the digital version of a human user by the designers of Lucasfilm's *Habitat*, an early virtual world from the 1980s (Morningstar & Farmer 1991). Along with *Habitat*, one of the most influential ways of imagining online interactions via avatars comes from Neil Stephenson's cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*, which depicted a virtual reality called the Metaverse, where an individual's social position was determined by the appearance of their avatar. Here, Stephenson is describing the Metaverse and avatars, specifically the avatar of the book's main character, the irreverently named Hiro Protagonist:

> As Hiro approaches the Street, he sees two young couples. …
> He is not seeing real people, of course. This is all a part of the
> moving illustration drawn by his computer according to specifi-
> cations coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces
> of software called avatars. They are the audiovisual bodies that
> people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse. …
> Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limita-
> tions of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar
> beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can be
> wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup …
> (Stephenson 1992: 35–36)

In these early examples, an avatar was always a visual, graphical repre-
sentation of a user, one that may or may not correspond to the 'real' body
of the user. And, especially in *Snow Crash*, there is an ideal of *crafting*
identity with avatars. Identity relates to the mediated body and its pres-
ence for others, along with the *techniques* required for anything called
'identity'. With the avatar, identity is a cultural technique, something that
involves cultivation directly associated with the use and knowledge of
technology.

Recently, the term avatar has been used to describe nearly any rep-
resentation of a user – textual, visual, or otherwise – not only in virtual
worlds, but in forms of social media as diverse as internet forums, blogs,
or social networking websites. So, while the text-based descriptions of
LambdaMOO were not initially described as avatars, we may now think of
them as such. As we've moved past these text-based worlds our identities
online are no longer just forms of textual description. They now include
images and animations, and, with voice chat, perhaps sounds as well. Our
avatar is a representation of our identity, but its specific form depends on
the platform or technology we may be using, along with the techniques
demanded by that platform or technology.

We still have a tendency to think of the self-fashioning of avatars as
a kind of identity play, attributing these visual representations the same
fluidity and flexibility as textual descriptions, even though the ways that
bodies become present to others has challenged many of the arguments
outlined by authors like Turkle and Stone. Because of the fluidity offered
by the avatar, some, drawing on the findings of Turkle, forecasted a future
in which racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination based on
identity would wane because of the ability to remake one's identity online
through 'disembodied' avatars.

Turkle, however, was sceptical of the claims people made about the seeming egalitarianism of performing another identity online:

> But as I listened to this boast [of 'understanding' the experience of another through online identity play and gender swapping], my mind often travelled to my own experiences of living in a woman's body. These include worry about physical vulnerability, fears of unwanted pregnancy and of infertility, fine-tuned decisions about how much make-up to wear to a job interview, and the difficulty of giving a professional seminar while doubled over with monthly cramps. To a certain extent, knowledge is inherently experiential, based on a physicality that we each experience differently. (1995: 238)

Our lives are grounded in our physical bodies, along with the techniques required for the performance of identity and the management of a body's biological rhythms and behaviours. Having an avatar cannot replace or transform the simple fact that I inhabit this world through my body and the physical practices I perform because of my body.

Sexism, racism, and homophobia persist online, in spite of the seeming flexibility and fluidity of the avatar. Many recent authors have determined that possibilities enabled by avatars are not as fluid as initially thought. Prejudice against non-normative avatars, such as those that are non-white or overweight, still remains even with the variable, virtual body of the avatar. Because identity can be changed online, marginal identities are often completely erased in virtual worlds – when given the option, people rarely choose to have avatars that do not conform to 'desirable' identities (Nakamura 2002). Rather than enabling a more equitable way of understanding identity through digital representations, avatars reproduce – if not exacerbate – the prejudices about identity already present in the offline world. Because prejudices still exist online, users may choose to represent their identity in a way that simply repeats privileged identity categories.

If and when marginal identities are represented online, often they are so via drop-down menus that do not permit fluid manifestations of identity. Because of the visual aspects of avatar creation, instead of open-ended textual description we are now presented with (often elaborate) character-creation applications for online worlds and games, which, while highly customizable, are limited, and certainly do not include a range of imaginative categories for gender like that of LambdaMOO. There is a fetishizing of the 'skin' of the avatar (Hillis 2009: 157), and non-white and non-male

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avatars tend to be represented through reductive, stereotypical, and often sexualized caricatures, especially when users 'pass' as a race or gender that is different from that of their own body.

Rust, a multiplayer survival game known for being chaotic and anarchic, reveals some of these issues regarding identity in games. Initially, the game only had white, bald men as avatars, many of whom were naked. When the game's designers added race and gender for the game's avatars, instead of allowing players to customize their characters, as is the case with almost any other online, multiplayer game, *Rust* randomly assigned race and gender (along with the size of genitalia), permanently associating these categories with a player's account. 'We wanted a way to recognize people beyond their names, kind of a fingerprint', according to *Rust*'s lead designer Garry Newman. 'We already kind of have this; players recognize each other via their voice, and that's pretty interesting. So we wanted to push it further'. And even though the options initially built into the game were limited, Newman noted that 'There's a lot of skin colours in the world, and it's really easy to appear racially insensitive when doing this', but, 'Our ideal scenario is one in which no two players look the same, so you'll recognize someone in game by their face to the extent that nametags will be redundant' (Quoted in Grayson 2015).

Rust is, perhaps unintentionally, making a significant statement about identity online. On the one hand, *Rust*'s designers affirm that an avatar is not particularly anchored to the 'real' body of the player. It is, nonetheless, something that can be used for purposes of identification. Ideally, these identities will not be defined in terms of biological identities or generic classes, but in terms of a wide range of diverse bodies that are completely unique and differentiated. This means that *Rust* is operating with a kind of anti-essentialist understanding of identity. Even though it includes race and gender as categories, its designers want to extend these categories to be so diverse that identities are not listed as a set of fixed options on a drop-down menu. There is no essential or fixed understanding of identity, but rather pure diversity – at least in an ideal future when the software actually achieves the complexity needed to realize this goal.

The example of *Rust* also emphasizes that the open fluidity promised by online identity has become another way to perpetuate racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Being able to choose identities has actually reduced the different ways that identities are performed online. The avatar becomes something that players must 'see' as similar to themselves, or at least 'see' as something over which they have control – or else they may get exceptionally angry, as many *Rust* players did in reaction to

the forced identity categories they were required to use. Newman noted that the inclusion of a broader range of races led to the increase of racial slurs and hate speech in the game itself – it didn't seem to do anything to challenge or question the racism or sexism of many of the game's players. And, we again see how the materiality of the technology itself permits (or prohibits) specific ways that bodies become visible to others. The medium itself is that which shapes and transforms the limits and possibilities for identity performed online.

'You Only Have One Identity'

Rust is only one of many recent attempts to undermine the fluidity of online identity. By linking a randomly generated avatar to a specific account, the game, while still pseudonymous, is attempting to control some of the possibilities once enabled by digital interaction online. *Rust* is, in part, attempting to negotiate having a clear, set identity with the anonymity that characterized early online interactions – and still characterizes identity on places like the message board 4chan. With anonymity, because there's no inherent consistency in how one becomes present to another (usually via text), then one can effectively change identities over and over again, embracing a multiplicity of identities instead of one that is anchored to the body (although, of course, we've already seen that bodily identity itself is neither unified nor consistent). *Rust*'s designers want to make this fluidity difficult, if not impossible. Your avatar in the game is your *only* identity in the game. At the same time, *Rust*'s players are not truly the same as their avatar; there is a clear distinction between the two, even though the avatar may be linked to the user's 'real' identity (if only an identity that is 'real' because it comes from the online account required to play the game).

The fear of complete anonymity online is understandable. Because the body only makes itself present to others in a limited way, the possibilities for identity expand. But, at the same time, the obligation to others may also vanish as we only encounter another as a textual abstraction or graphical representation that, some may imagine, is less than real. Anonymity, once celebrated as something that permits political agency online, is now more often thought to be a tool used by trolls to harass and harm others. This has, increasingly, led to attempts to permanently fix identity online, linking it to a specific body, limiting the fluidity once celebrated by Stone and Turkle.

Much of the early celebration of blogging, for instance, was often centred on how blogs permitted individuals to speak online, to have a voice, and yet remain hidden and outside the boundaries of state surveillance.

This was clearly the case for bloggers in the Middle East during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Bloggers from Iraq and Iran, who went by names like Salem Pax, Riverbend, and NHK, used the anonymity and veiling of digital media to have a clear voice. NHK, an Iraqi teenager, wrote on her blog, 'I don't put my real name on this blog because I'm not allowed to have a free opinion in this life. I can't tell the truth until I am sure that no one knows who I am' (quoted in Bollmer 2016: 163). Political agency, here, was equated to the ability of digital media to veil the speaker. The ability to speak 'truth' was a by-product of being hidden.

With social media, these celebrations of anonymity have long vanished. A social networking website like MySpace (to use an example that may seem long dated) allowed users to customize their profile in countless ways, and even to use names that had little to do with one's real name, perhaps even changing this name at will. This level of potential anonymity is certainly not the case for many social media platforms today, and the moral panics surrounding various (often short-lived) messaging apps, such as Kik and YikYak, come from the seeming anonymity afforded by the platform, which can lead to brutal harassment and bullying. Solutions to this problem have been to permanently link one's account to a specific expression of identity, just as in *Rust*. Facebook has been exceptionally vocal about maintaining these links between one's 'real' identity and what's uploaded online. 'You only have one identity', Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg stated in a 2009 interview, 'The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly … the level of transparency the world has now won't support having two identities for a person' (quoted in Bollmer 2016: 169).

These changes can be described though Alice Marwick and danah boyd's (2011) concept of *context collapse*, as mentioned earlier. With any form of communication, we generally have an 'imagined audience' in mind, or a general *public* that we address (Warner 2002). As is the case with any performance of identity, the strategies we use for communication change depending on how we imagine our audience. But social media websites, be it Facebook, Twitter, or any number of other platforms through which you are supposed to publicly perform 'you' for other people, multiple audiences and contexts are collapsed into one. Today, we are interpellated into performing a single identity, all the time, and anything other than that single identity is somehow 'false'. Hopefully, at this point, you can see how strange this way of thinking of identity is. Our identities have long been partial and fragmentary. But, today, we're increasingly

told that we only have one identity, and we should make that single iden-
tity visible to others.

We are even told that having a single, fixed identity is something that
has actual economic value. Many of the practices of identity online seem
to follow what Theresa Senft has described as *microcelebrity*, or 'the com-
mitment to deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a
branded good, with the expectation that others do the same' (2013: 346).
Alice Marwick, drawing on Senft, has suggested that this is a general strat-
egy for using social media, especially if one wants to be popular, attract
followers and friends, and get likes and attention. Individuals tend to apply
'market principles to how they think about themselves, interact with oth-
ers, and display their identity' (Marwick 2013: 7), imagining 'authentici-
ty' and 'being yourself' not merely as self-presentation strategies, but as
a means to make oneself a commodity and potential celebrity. Consider-
ing how many new jobs, such as social media manager and social media
'influencer', appear to have economic viability, there is certainly truth to
this. But, even for those who do not seem to want to be 'microcelebrities'
via social media, the belief that one should 'be yourself', perpetuating one
'true' identity via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, is certainly far more
common than the multiple contexts and identities that were once celebrated
by Turkle.

Near the end of his life, in 1990, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze
published a short essay titled 'Postscript on Control Societies'. In it, he
argued that we were no longer in a world defined by clearly differen-
tiated institutions like those discussed by Althusser. Instead, we were
entering a new society, a 'control society', defined by 'ultrarapid forms
of apparently free-floating control' (Deleuze 1995: 178). For Deleuze,
school, once with a clear end point called 'graduation', is becoming 'con-
tinuous education' or 'lifelong learning' with no clear end. Health care is
becoming preventative and about calculation and prediction, as is
finance. And, in terms of identities, instead of a clear 'individual' we
become *dividuals* – who we are is divided up into discrete units, where
'masses become samples, data, markets, or "*banks*"' (1995: 180). What
once was a unitary, undividable 'self' (an in-dividual), has been divided
up endlessly into smaller and smaller bits of discrete data, the totality of
which is thought to be 'you'. Seemingly constant surveillance, designed
to analyze statistics and prevent sickness, disorder, and crime before it
happens, is implemented nearly everywhere, in which we are constantly
compelled to generate personal data, which is analyzed by software and
computer systems beyond human awareness. I mention Deleuze and his

control society because it appears, to me, that the transformations in identity that we see with social media also demonstrate this shift from institutions (in which we have many, contextual identities) to a generalized system of 'free-floating control' (in which we have one identity that can be broken down into countless permutations of digitally-analyzed data). So, you may only have one identity, but it is one that can be divided up in countless ways.

This understanding of identity can be seen in the rise of self-tracking via smartphones and wearables. The past few years have seen the growth of health tracking via iPhones and the Apple Watch, FitBits and more, along with apps designed to monitor movement, exercise, sex, and diet in any number of ways. These devices suggest that there's something about our own bodies and behaviours that we're blind to in our everyday lives, only made visible through the quantification of the body and the analysis of data (see Lupton 2016). We are assumed to be little more than our data, which can be uploaded, analyzed, and understood in ways that we remain blind to without the help of our digital devices (see Bollmer 2016). While we may not think of the things we track via our phones and wearables as part of our identities, they nonetheless frame 'who we are' in terms of data that can be gathered, understood, and statistically analyzed. This, again, follows a cybernetic understanding of identity and imagines the human body as a constellation of data points that can be interpreted and used for purposes of control and management.

CONCLUSION

What I've described here can be thought of as two different, but intertwining arguments. First, 'identity' should be understood in relationship to the technologies we use to *become present* to another. The possibilities of identity are related to how we interact, and the elements of our bodies that become present are either relatively fixed or relatively flexible based on how we can communicate. Second, as digital media move from primarily textual interactions, to graphical avatars, to social media profiles and Big Data, we've seen fluid identities shift to a single, fixed identity made up of an assemblage of data that can be uploaded and shared online. This perhaps leads us back to cybernetics and the assumptions it makes about identity and the body. This isn't an ontological argument about identity, but an historical claim that suggests we may be imagining identity in a way that equates a true self with data that can be recorded and

analyzed. This hopefully demonstrates how a cybernetic understanding of identity is not the only way we can imagine identity, but also shows us that the way we imagine identity today seems to repeat the logic of cybernetics in everyday life.

Throughout this chapter, the idea of having an *identity* has been linked with, or contrasted with, the fact that we intrinsically have a *body*. But what is a body? Like the possibilities we have for identity, digital media transform the capacities and possibilities of the human body. It is to this problem that we now turn.

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