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AVATARS AS GHOSTS IN MMORPG

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As the adoption rate of new media technologies grows ever faster, possibilities for self expression and virtual identity formation increase. While much is said about the prevalence of our lives online, little research to date considers that mortality on equal terms to the lives we live offline. Informed by theories from existential psychology (Becker, 1973) and communication (Peters, 1999), our research considers the ways in which avatars created for virtual gaming environments capture the essence of their creators and live on inside the game environment by mirroring the features of what in popular culture might be called ghosts. Given that avatars become central features of the game world, our work likens the ghost-like avatar presence to the dynamics of hauntings in popular literature.

Previous research on avatars has suggested the possibilities of such hauntings. The deletion of an avatar after a server shutdown has been described as a “kind of death” or feeling of a “ghost limb” by those engaged in virtual worlds (Pearce & Artemesia, 2009). Avatars are considered as active prostheses under a player’s control, rather than the ways they may exceed our ability to manage and make sense of their actions and apparitions. Gamer parlance even features the term ‘spiritual successor’ to mean a new game developed by the same creator of another (Ladd & Harcourt, 2005). However, avatar research typically focuses more sharply on ‘living’ avatars and their relationship to identity construction. Both single-player and multi-player avatar studies have investigated gender (Eklund, 2011; Hayes, 2007), morality (Schrier, 2012; Wolfendale, 2007), and identity tourism (Huh & Williams, 2010; McDonald, 2012; Nakamura, 2002).

Further substantiation of the developing definitions of social existence (virtual and otherwise), as well as the human body and soul become imperative when addressing complex queries regarding mortality across mediums. Habib (2011) provides a useful

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semantic definition for the academic usage of the term Ghost, just as other scholars (Sconce, 2000; Steinhart, 2007; Ross, 2013) have imbued digital media with a sensible comparison to the ghostly being. Significantly, our work adapts the observations of Edmund Carpenter (1973) in that the essence of the human spirit can be captured in images. We argue that, like the images Carpenter defined as tokens of our ethereal being (1973), avatars are animated expressions of their creator's essence capable of operating on and transcending multiple planes (physical, and digital) in the same manner as the semantic ghost defined by Habib (2011). As these avatars transcend corporeal limitations they may then be imbued with the aura of an otherworldly being. Using a semiotic discourse analysis we examine the nonverbal discourses within the world of MMORPG. A semiotic analysis extends the study of discourses beyond just a textual analysis of the game's dialogue and messages, to the discursive elements found in the interaction of play (van Dijk, 1985; Fairclough, 1995). Our approach to semiotic discourse analysis will follow the grounded theory tradition where researchers examine texts through intuitive means in order to find patterns repeated to redundancy, and meriting discursive explication (Bryant & Charmaz (Eds.), 2007).

In applying this method to our text of choice, the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV*, we will consider to what degree avatars, like ghosts, evoke physiological and psychological distress in living players, using metaphysical tactics equivalent to a haunting. For example, the disappearance and reappearance of the moving avatar (as it's attached player experiences connection lag), or the names of long discarded avatars appearing as the crafter of a piece of equipment still in use, may haunt those avatars still alive and active in the world. Other discourses under consideration include whether the digital remnants of avatars can impact other players and the game space itself, and to what degree this compares with the known phenomena of haunting. As haunting is tied not only to the essence of a being, but also a place, our work centers on the discourses of online spaces, and the questions those spaces and their affordances raise about the presence or absence of life within them.

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