

Innovations

The Blurring of the Virtual and the Real: Internet Communities & Virtual Avatars

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Abstract:

The creation of virtual communities has become a reality since the expansion of the worldwide network at an unprecedented pace and attendant advances in technology. It also has created new possibilities where individuals find new space for the projection of alternative identities in this virtual community. The discord rooms give life to these alternative identities where like-minded individuals interact and indulge in activities that range from recreation and entertainment to life-transforming personality changes. Video games and internet communities were created to allow players to create a group among themselves, which is called a clan or a guild. These names are drawn from historically formed human collectivities. The members of these groups spend enormous amounts of time in these online communities, where communication among friends is simple. In an online game community, a player-created-clan makes members of the group share an emotional bond over a period of time and seek comfort. The community fosters a sense of belongingness and may act as a stress-buster. Membership, Influence, Integration, and Shared Emotional Connection are the essential components of a community. All these are found in online communities. In multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft, the players create an internet community, where the members create avatars of themselves, which are the virtual representations of their actual identities, to interact with other members. Virtual life consumes emotional energy like real life, and individuals may even lose track of their identities in their physical-social world while focusing on developing their online identities. In this paper, we shall interrogate how the internet communities influence the users' personalities and how the vicarious may blur the real.

Keywords: Avatar, Discord Rooms, Internet Community, Personality Development, Video Games

Introduction:

Hinduism uses the Sanskrit word 'avatara', which means "descent". Descent describes an incarnation or physical manifestation of an eternal person. To reinstate cosmic order, Lord Vishnu, a principal Hindu deity, is thought to have manifested as an avatar. The ten main manifestations of Lord Vishnu, are known as the Dashavatara according to ancient Hindu mythology. Ancient Indian mythology states that when Hindu gods and goddesses need to interact with the material world of humans, they create avatars. But the concept of avatar in today's technological world represents something entirely different. With the development of computer technology and the virtual worlds it has created, the term "avatar" has been used to refer to videogames characters played by the players of the game. Avatars are frequently used in video games to let players interact with and experience a virtual world. The user may choose to build their ideal

or true selves while making their avatar. An avatar is "the user's representative character in the virtual environment". According to Chris Crawford, 'An avatar is a virtual construct that is controlled by human users and serves as a means for communicating with other characters within the game'. Athomas Goldberg defines an avatar as "representations of 'real' persons in a computer-generated environment. The first video game was called Quake which allowed the players to change the appearance of the avatar. (Waggoner, 2009)

Online identity is a layout of a person's identifiable traits in the virtual world. A player in the virtual game, creates an online character in the virtual space to distinguish him (his avatar) from other users (Huang et al., 2021). He builds his avatars with certain traits which in turn helps him to create his online identity. People create avatars, or 3D anthropomorphic digital representations of themselves, for use in virtual worlds. Participants' interactions with one another and the environment are mediated through avatars. Avatars may sit, stand, move around, drive, dance, and interact with one another in the virtual world just like how a human behaves in the real world. The appearance of a person in a virtual environment is represented by their avatar. The only restrictions on how people may express themselves through the look of their avatars are their imaginations and the technology at hand. It is unclear if people project representations of themselves through their avatars that are very similar to or dissimilar from their real-world identities. Are avatars more or less appealing than the humans they represent, in particular? Whether conduct in virtual worlds is systematically distinct from behaviour in the actual world? What criterion does the user take into account while creating his/her avatar? Does the user want the avatar he/she creates to resemble their real self or do they create an avatar which resembles someone they fantasise or wish to be? Some users in the virtual world design their ideal appearance while establishing an avatar, whether it be a representation of who they are in real life or a separate identity. In the virtual world, avatar looks may be created and changed in a number of ways.

Users must combine the urge to establish a look that reflects a desired virtual identity with demands from society conventions. Four user types—Realistic, Ideals, Fantasies, and Role-players have different identification demands. A user's mental image of themselves might be used to generate an avatar in the virtual world. People in the real world portray their identities to others via their interactions and activities. Users display several identities in the virtual world. Some people merge their virtual persona with their real identity. They are realistic. Realists are persons who desire both their online and offline identities to have the same qualities. Their existence in the virtual world serves as only an extension of their actual existence. They want their virtual world activities to be integrated into their real-world ones, creating an overlap between the two. The look of realistic avatars is created to satisfy these identification requirements. They make an effort to make their avatar as identical to their real-life appearance as feasible.

Some people construct an identity that is distinct from who they are in real life. They are called fantasies. Individuals who fantasise about having two distinct identities—one in the actual world and one in the virtual one—are those people. They feel that their actual life and the virtual world are two distinct places and that they wish to pretend to be someone they are not in the real world. Some users create an identity which is different from their real self in order to experience something which is not possible in their real life. They create avatars as a representation to role play. Role players are those who enter the virtual world to experience it as someone else and to encounter circumstances they would not typically encounter. Role players regularly fulfil new fantasies and do not preserve identity consistency, which is how this group differs from Fantasies. Some role players change their avatars characters depending upon the quest or the game situation.

Others visit the virtual world to become their best selves. They are the ideals. Even if their personalities are the same in the actual world and the virtual one, Ideals believe that their physical attributes are less than perfect and work to correct these perceptions. This implies that their appearance will vary somewhat across the two worlds, reflecting their true appearance in an idealised way. Each of these individuals has a desire to build a virtual persona that represents who they are or who they want to be in the virtual world.

Creating an avatar becomes an important task for the player since it represents him throughout the game and it acts as an identity to the player. So, an avatar is a manifestation of some dimension of the user's personality (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009). It can potentially be an important element constitutive of a person's social self.

This research paper tries to analyse the relationship between one's real-life self-identity and their virtual identity. For some users, the connection they have towards their avatar and the virtual world is more intimate than what they have with their real world and this might lead to blurring of the real and the virtual in the future. Many people feel as though their avatar self is their real self. This can often be evident in the fact that many players are distressed when something unpleasant happens to their virtual persona. The avatar-persona is intricately linked to our virtual and real-world experiences, just as the word "avatar" originally meant an intermediary between two realms. This research seeks to uncover the complexity in the ties between users and their virtual world avatars. According to Katherine Hayles, "The avatar is both visible and invisible, just as the user is both present and absent inside the virtual game" (Waggoner, 2009). Similarly, the avatar's nature and behaviour in the virtual game sometimes may be tied to the characteristics of the real-life player. The user determines the nature of the avatar, yet the avatar also exists independently from the user. The avatar is both a part of and distinct from the user. In certain circumstances, persons who have attractive avatars than their real self may appear more self-assured and outgoing in virtual environments than their real environment (Messinger, 2007). Participants in virtual worlds display a range of actions through their avatars, including travelling, seeing the world, operating cars, making purchases, building structures, joining clubs, engaging with other avatars, etc. Understanding the code of conduct in virtual worlds is crucial to determining if individuals are more likely to act in very abnormal ways in these settings or whether these behaviours have roots in the real world. People's actions in some virtual game environments often mirror those in the real world. And with the influence of the internet and technology in human life, the gap between virtual and real is shrinking. The users of the virtual games have developed a bond with their virtual identity which has resulted in the behavioural changes with their real self. Sometimes, in the virtual world, the player might lose his/her original identity where they lose one's sense of self that might cause one to act in ways that are out of character for them.

The value of being able to escape from the reality of the issues and situations that are prevalent in our society is one major reason for some people to get into these virtual games. It is essential to have a means to escape or break out into another universe where you have greater control. Therefore, gaming is ideal since it allows the user to escape reality and enter a separate universe filled with unique living things. Most video games allow the user to become someone or something that they can't be in the real world, which helps them forget about their reality. These video games help users to escape to a fantasy where they can be whatever they want, and have anything they want.

Over time, the user develops a "strong emotional link," with his virtual self. Additionally, avatars have been suggested as a way for users to express suppressed parts of their persona. Because avatars allow for identity expression, creative expression, and immersion in the virtual world, avatar identification is regarded as a desirable experience which gives emotional support and satisfaction to the user since his/her real-life identity might not be what he/she desires. Especially for teenagers, the virtual identity they create is something they desire and these online communities have made them feel at ease and hence they spend most of their time online, interacting with fellow users which has created a bond that makes them feel part of that virtual community. So, this research paper will also focus on the construction of youth identity and how it gets shaped by virtual communities.

Methodology used:

This research paper used both doctrinal as well as empirical method. It was based on analysis of books, articles, online sources and empirical method such as unstructured interviews to understand the impact of the internet community and virtual world on the user.

Evolution of video games:

The development of rudimentary games and simulations on minicomputers and mainframes by computer scientists in the 1950s and 1960s marked the beginning of the history of video games. One of the first video games of this type was created in 1962 by MIT students as a pastime. Early in the 1970s, the first consumer video gaming hardware was made available. Computer Space and Pong were the first arcade video games, while the Magnavox Odyssey was the first home video game machine. Following Pong's translation for home consoles, several businesses sprang to clone the game in an effort to replicate its popularity in both

the arcade and the home. This led to a succession of boom-and-bust cycles because of saturation and a lack of creativity.

The discrete transistor-transistor logic circuitry of the early hardware was replaced by low-cost programmable microprocessors by the middle of the 1970s, and the first ROM cartridge-based home consoles, such as the Atari Video Computer System, debuted (VCS). The home console industry also experienced tremendous expansion with the heyday of arcade video games like Space Invaders and Pac-Man. The 1983 video game crash in the United States was marked by an overabundance of games, many of which were subpar or copies, and by competition from low-cost personal computers and newly created game genres. The crash forced Japan's video gaming industry, which had suffered only modest effects from the crash, to assume leadership of the market. In order to revive the struggling video game industry, Nintendo debuted the Nintendo Entertainment System in the United States in 1985. The development of video games throughout the latter half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s was fueled by the development and advancement of personal computers, as well as the console war conflict between Nintendo and Sega as they competed for market dominance in the United States. In the 1990s, Nintendo's Game Boy platform pioneered the way for the introduction of the first significant portable gaming systems. The Internet had also been widely used by consumers by the late 1990s, and online features had started to appear in video games. Microsoft launched the Xbox series of consoles at the beginning of the 2000s out of concern that Sony's PlayStation, which was positioned as a gaming console and entertainment system would supplant personal computers.

The industry saw a demographic transition between the 2000s and the 2010s as mobile gaming on smartphones and tablets replaced portable consoles, casual gaming grew as a market segment, and there was an increase in gamers from China and other nations not previously associated with the industry. To capitalise on these trends, traditional revenue models were replaced with recurring income stream models such as free-to-play, freemium, and subscription-based games. Opportunities for more experimental and imaginative independent game creation developed during the 2000s and 2010s, helped by the rise of mobile and casual gaming and the simplicity of digital distribution, while triple-A video game production got more expensive and risk-averse. The support for high-definition video at fast frame rates as well as for virtual and augmented reality-based games continues to drive advancement in video games. The first social network games appeared on social networks as social media sites grew. These games, which frequently feature casual gaming concepts, depend on players interacting with their friends on social networking sites in order to make the game interactive and engaging and to generate "community feel" to keep the players playing. Happy Farm, which was made popular in China in 2008, is regarded as the pioneer for such interactive virtual games.

Virtual world:

A computer-based online community setting known as a virtual world is created and shared by users to allow for their interaction in a distinct, simulated world. In this virtual environment, users communicate with one another via avatars, which are text-based, two- or three-dimensional graphical representations. Utilizing computer graphics imaging (CGI) or any other similar type of technology, avatars are produced. With the help of keyboards, mouse, and other specialised command and simulation tools, users may operate their avatars. Virtual worlds nowadays are created with a variety of goals in mind, including entertainment, social interaction, education, and training.

For instance, the Virtual game 'World of Warcraft' is an interactive game where players create avatars in order to play the game. This game does not have any end goal. World of Warcraft is a realistic virtual environment where players must contend with peril, adopt identities, battle with comprehension and communication, learn how to use technology, and compete for few resources. Beyond the specifics of fantasy and science fiction, as many have pointed out, it's not wholly dissimilar to the world of today (Bainbridge, 2010). In these virtual games, a virtual world is created where users can be whoever they want and get settled wherever they want. The virtual game world makes the user feel unreal as real. It creates a second life for the players creating a community feel and a sense of belonging.

In these virtual games, the setting endures and evolves throughout time. Other players' representations may be dining, interacting and dancing while few other players are sleeping in their actual world; their virtual

homes may be renovated and redecorated and their virtual marriages may occur while few players are occupied in their real world. The architecture of the virtual world and the personalities of other players may have altered by the time the player returns. Naturally, all of these changes take place in a represented reality, and people who live in virtual worlds communicate with one another through representational proxies that may or may not correspond to their controllers' physical characteristics. In these virtual realms, representational proxies are referred to as "avatars". Unlike previous video game alter egos, the modern avatars may be extensively modified and are primarily meant for social interaction. At the moment, avatars in virtual worlds communicate with one another via floating "speech bubbles" or text-based chat windows. Avatars use their looks to convey their personality. One may customise their avatar's appearance—including its face, clothing, and body type—and use body language to interact with other people. For instance, avatars in the Sims Online may express their emotions by yawning, clapping, shouting, shaking their fists, crying, hugging, kissing, dancing, and hundreds of other common human gestures."(Herold, 2003). Participants in the virtual world create houses, furnishings, and outfits for their Avatars.

Many users who have decided to visit virtual worlds stay residents of them, maybe because these rich forms of social interaction are supported by them. For instance, the typical Ever-Quest user and Norrath avatar logs in to the virtual realm for roughly 20 hours every week (Castronova,2001). The users who play in these virtual games by creating avatars for themselves, get attached to the game and its virtual world because of which the time he/she spends on the virtual world will gradually start increasing and they start drifting away from their reality. Even though the virtual world is unreal, the users spend a considerable amount of money to buy virtual things for their virtual life. One important reason why the players in these virtual worlds get engrossed in the game is that it creates a parallel alternative life to the player which he/she seeks, thereby providing a way for the player to escape his/her reality. This virtual world creates an internet community for these players making them part of the community which is not restricted by any strict laws prevailing in their reality. Since the internet community is not governed by the standard norms of the society, the player gets the freedom to do whatever he/ she wants which might not be appreciated in their real life.

"Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games" (MMORPGs) are widely available online. These games are well recognised for their online forums that enable communication in a made-up, virtual environment. In fact, it is difficult to play World of Warcraft without player contact since it encourages such high levels of social connection (Gillis, 2011, p.147). Because they offer a virtual setting where people of any age, gender, background, or profession may meet and engage with one another, these multiplayer online video games are excellent at fostering internet communities (LCadet, 2019)

In most of the well-known multiplayer online video games, the players spend a lot of time alone in front of their displays. However, despite spending hours alone, gamers aren't always lonely. Gamers have mastered the ability of creating communities within and around video games thanks to the emergence of social media. Gamers build real, durable connections as well as rivalries with strangers online.

Although the idea of socializing in a game may be novel to some, gamers have long used technology like this to form relationships online and remain in touch. Instead of the user's real presence, their virtual presence through the Avatar created by the player will be present in the video games. The players may still engage and converse even when the other player is not physically there. The players when playing an online multiplayer game using their avatars tend to interact with other players, and as a result, they get more familiar with one another over time.

Professor Mark Griffiths at Nottingham Trent University has spent decades researching socialisation in video games and has written on gaming friendships during the epidemic. He released research in 2003 that revealed that for 11,000 participants of the online role-playing game, interacting with other players who are strangers and getting to know them was their preferred aspect of the game. According to him, the study provided a clear and early debunking of the myth that playing video games makes players antisocial and alone. In another research in the year 2007, he examined 912 players from 45 nations who played massively multiplayer online (MMO) role-playing games on average for about 22 hours per week and came to the conclusion that the online gaming environment was "very socially interactive." (Lufkin, 2020)

An important factor contributing to the frequency of communities emerging from video games is their participatory aspect, which encourages "participatory culture" among players. Video games are excellent at

building virtual worlds with virtual settings and tales that include a variety of puzzles for players to solve. To do this, the players must cooperate with one another as a team. It can be exceedingly challenging for a single player to accomplish a game entirely on their own since they may not have the necessary skills to complete challenging stages or defeat a tough opponent boss. The lone player will turn to the online community for assistance and friendly competition in order to win the game (LCadet, 2019). Players will value the interactions that occurs throughout the game which builds teamwork and co-ordination and the players will find it more enjoyable and satisfying than playing alone. In other words, when individuals get together to interact and exchange ideas in order to accomplish a shared goal, a community is formed. This is why video games are good at creating online communities because they provide goals that inspire cooperation among players.

These days, playing video games is a popular pastime that virtually unites individuals all over the world. Video games create online communities by enticing users to interact socially in a variety of ways. When players are not completing quests or other types of missions, safe areas like "Guilds" are good places for the players to interact with one another and socialise. On the other hand, when they want to finish a mission or a quest, players can form teams and groups with fellow players in order to play and complete the quest. During the game, the players in the team can communicate with one another in order to achieve the common object of finishing the mission.

Role playing:

Role-playing in video games is a feature that emphasises "participative culture" and is a significant component in the development of an established community. Role-playing is a method of playing video games that makes use of the "player-to-player interaction" settings offered by the game world. It can inspire players to engage and work together to create their own storylines within the game. Role-playing can take place both inside and outside of the game's narrative, but by utilising its aspects, whole communities can be created only for this purpose as players will interact with one another to create storylines, original dialogue, and fictional goals (Connor et al., 2015). In multiplayer online role-playing games, players have the option to create a character/ avatar and select a role or specialisation, such as a knight or a hunter or a healer, etc., when roleplaying inside the game's narrative. A single player needs to build a team with other players who perform different roles in order to progress farther in the game and level up. A group of players that perform diverse roles on the same team have a greater chance of progressing through the game and reaching higher levels, which promotes cooperation and communication. Roleplaying inside the game narratives of online games can help create online communities. Players will be encouraged to connect with other players in order to create a strong team, or "party," as it is known in gaming parlance. While the way a player communicates and behaves in real life and in online games might differ greatly, role-playing is an act that allows players to build a persona that they can use to communicate with other players in such games (Henningsson, 2009). A male player can create a female character in online games like GTA Online or World of Warcraft and then behave like one while dealing with other players. Players can create groups they feel a part of during role-playing, and they can utilize this identity to set themselves apart from other players. Because of this, gamers may establish communities inside video games to forge an identity that will set them apart from other players who are a part of different communities. Each player's character/ avatar may differ in their strengths and weaknesses. A psychological sense of community, is the perception of belonging to a more substantial, reliable structure group. Since massive multiplayer online games have created an online community, it is likely that the members of the online game groups will have a sense of belonging to that group thereby creating a community feel. Another important dimension that we need to take into account is the development of social self and how these participatory and interactive processes are implicated in the process. Here we may draw inspiration from the works of C. H. Cooley and G.H. Mead who have proposed powerful theories of Development of Self. Both concur that the interactive and participatory dimensions are central in developing a 'self-image' which helps us to navigate through the social world playing appropriate social roles. The interactions of the avatars may have the potential to shape our social selves at multiple levels. We shall attempt an elaboration of these ideas in the later part of this work.

Discussion:

To what extent a user has control over his/her avatar in the multiverse or virtual world? Will the user's mental health be affected when his/her avatar is assaulted?

Single player online games, the user will have control over his avatar and what it does and the non-player characters will not be controlled by the user rather it is system control which is pre programmed. The user in such solo online games will just be completing his/her missions and there will be very minimal interaction involved in such games. But it is the Massive Multiplayer Online games like world of warcraft where there are multiple players playing the game simultaneously and these players will be represented by the avatars created by them. In such games, the avatar conduct will be determined by the conduct of other avatars. The users control over the avatar will be determined by the goals of the team/guild to which the user's avatar belongs. The avatar in such multiplayer games will be doing things according to the user but the user will not be having the complete autonomy, he will have to conduct his avatar according to the guild's objectives, i.e., to coordinate among his team players and complete a quest.

Recently, a 43-year-old British lady alleges that many male avatars groped her in the virtual world. In the Horizon Venues of Meta, a lady by the name of Nina Jane Patel claimed that three or four male avatars had "verbally and sexually assaulted" her avatar. In accordance with Meta, a beta tester reported being molested by an unknown person on Horizon Worlds. Meta acknowledged posting her experience in the Horizon Worlds beta testing group on Facebook (Zitser, 2022). According to Jesse Fox, an Ohio State University professor who studies the social effects of virtual worlds, "you're going to feel violated if you deeply identify with your avatar and are expressing yourself in a genuine manner." (Wong, 2016).

So even in this virtual world, complete control of what happens to one's avatar will not be there. When the user's avatar is sexually assaulted in the virtual world, it will affect their mental health in the real world. And if a user is sexually assaulted in their real life and they join these multiplayer online games as a means to escape their reality and they get assaulted in such a virtual world as well, it will result in serious trauma to their mental health. Likewise, when the avatar is not able to solve a quest or if the avatar is killed during the completion of a mission, the user's mental state is affected till his avatar comes back to life which might take some time.

For this research purpose, an unstructured interview was conducted on a random sample of 15 young adults aged 20-23 and it was found that most of them spend a minimum of 20 hours a week on virtual worlds and they have developed a connection to their avatar. In the research, it was found that they spend money to make their avatar attractive so that they can be unique in the virtual world. It was also found that if their avatar dies or loses during a quest, the player has undergone mental breakdown till they win or till they revive their avatar.

In the unstructured interview, it was also found that most of them have interacted with complete strangers in the virtual world and have created a virtual community where they have developed a bond. Members of this community have met virtually as well as in real life. It was also found that the player has been influenced by the virtual community and has taken in certain characteristics of his/her fellow virtual community members.

Internet communities:

The Internet has completely changed how we communicate, to the point that it is now our preferred medium. The development of the Internet has spurred a discussion regarding how social interactions are impacted by online communication. We are no longer constrained by physical boundaries thanks to the Internet, which also brings us together in geographically dispersed groups. We live in a globalised, networked civilization that is interconnected by new technology. Researchers are becoming more and more interested in the functionality of mediated social spaces as settings where people may meet new people and catch up with existing acquaintances as a result of the development of new social technologies (Kowert et al., 2014).

One of the factors contributing to the development of internet communities is that humans have a fundamental desire for social connection and belonging. Internet communities include a variety of virtual settings where players may communicate with one another, including social networking sites and discord rooms. However due to the technological developments, online games these days have started

to incorporate in-game interactive elements because of which social engagement is not restricted to certain internet platforms alone but has extended to these online multiplayer video-games.

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games are distinguished by their communal elements and cooperative play. In these games, the players will belong to an online social group called "guilds," and they depend on each other's contributions and co-operation in playing a mission or a quest. In terms of a player's virtual avatars identity in relation to the game, guild participation is equally crucial. The game itself will create an internet gaming community where players of the games will interact with each other and form a connection. Players collaborate with one another in guilds to exchange skills, information, and resources like virtual money. One of the driving forces for playing such online multiplayer games is interaction with other players and sharing a common interest. Since in such internet communities, face to face interaction is not mandatory and members of the community can maintain anonymity, the members are likely to feel less insecure. And over time, a special bond can be formed in such an internet community among the members.

Because communication is so crucial to the survival of a gaming community, players establish groups to exchange experiences. Both game creation and community growth require community support. The majority of modern online games demand players to work together to solve challenges, which indicates that members must communicate with one another and necessitates tools for group dynamics, among other things. Community services boost gaming competitiveness, which in turn increases user loyalty. It goes without saying that games and gaming communities are closely entwined and constantly co-develop. Asynchronous and synchronous communication methods are both often used in gaming communities. On the one hand, players have the option of sending the community an asynchronous message. Gamers dispute issues they have while playing, offer and receive advice, and talk about new game features. Through forums like discord rooms, blogs, and social networking sites, gamers debate about gameplay issues, share and receive gaming strategy tips, and discuss new game features. On the other hand, all contemporary games have built-in chat modules that facilitate direct in-game contact, team formation, strategy debates, etc. Therefore, video games internet communities entail more than just exchanging messages, they also incorporate other service operations like a platform to trade game properties of players. Players in world of warcraft, for instance, may exchange stuff like rare items, weapons, money, etc. Virtual Assets are things that may be purchased for an avatar in a game using real-world cash. The most common examples are weapons, equipment, pets, mounts, and skin customizations. The user's relationship with his or her avatar serves as the driving force behind such purchasing behaviour. The avatar's appearance is important to the user, who also ensures that the avatar has all the resources needed to function in the virtual world. It is obvious in a multi-player setting that the avatars viewed on screen are graphical representations of actual people and could reflect human wants to be acknowledged, appreciated, and engaged. Additionally, the player controlling their avatar has goals, feelings, motives, and thoughts. Therefore, purchasing virtual goods is likely to have an effect on a gamer's mental health (Cleghorn & Griffiths, 2015).

Internet Gaming Communities share certain characteristics similar to real life communities such as a common objective or interest that serves as the justification for membership; shared activities; close relationships and communication; mutual assistance among community members; access to shared resources, including gaming tools, and resources (Cao et al., 2009) Some members of these internet community may be shy to socialise in their real life due to many factors but since in the Internet, the user's identity can be kept as a secret and they are interacting with strangers, they tend to behave differently than their real character. People that play a certain video game can get together to form a community, and because they are all playing the same game, they will be communicating with one another about common goals, interests, and purposes. Over time, they may develop a strong connection towards such an internet community to which they belong and such community and the user's virtual persona may have an impact on how they behave in their real life.

An American sociologist named Charles Horton Cooley used a sociopsychological framework to analyse society. The "looking-glass-self" concept that Cooley proposed was his most important contribution. The idea of the "looking glass self" shows that one's self-relation or how they see themselves is not an isolated occurrence but rather involves others. According to Cooley, society and people are just collective and

distributive facets of the same entity, not separate entities. He states that persons have a natural inclination to engage or socialise with others around them. A fundamental claim made by Cooley is that developed cognition cannot exist in an environment without communication. By applying the theory of Cooley, even in the virtual world, a member of the world will want their avatar to look like someone they idealise or want to be in order to gain attention and approval from other members (Rousseau, 2002). This can happen subconsciously. And in such a virtual world, the user tries to socialise with other members and create an identity for themselves.

The late 1800s sociologist George Herbert Mead is renowned for his theory of the social self, which incorporates the ideas of "self," "me," and "I." The development of the self is the main subject of Mead's writing. Mead's theory of the social self is founded on the idea that social interactions—such as seeing and engaging with others, reacting to others' judgments of oneself, and internalising external ideas and internal sentiments about oneself—are where the self-arises. According to Mead, the process of developing the self happens in three different phases: 1. Imitation: Children replicate adult behaviour in this stage without comprehending it. 2. Playground: A child pretends to be different characters, such as a mother, a teacher, a postman, a police officer, etc. Responses are not organised at this point. Thus, via elevating the roles of others, a child internalises the views of those who are important to him /her or who he/she idolises. 3. Game Stage: A child develops his /her ability to react to "Generalized Others" as he/she gets older. The person not only defines his/her own duties, but also those of his/her close relationships (family) (Dodds et al., 1997). Their social identity develops through this stage. Likewise, in a virtual world, a new user will try to imitate the appearance and behaviour of another user's avatar. But over time, he/she will pretend to adapt to some other character and later create a separate identity for himself/herself. The response that a virtual persona may not only simply shape the virtual self but also may influence particular perceptions of the real self.

Thus, a gaming community is an online group focused on communication via play. In this internet community, members join in order to escape from their reality, a distraction from everyday life, a platform for playing and interaction with new people from all around the world. The main goal of creating a community around a game is to improve the enjoyment of its participants. But it has become more than a mere enjoyment, members of the virtual world have developed a close connection to such an extent that they are unable to distinguish their real self from their virtual self.

Conclusion:

Online virtual Communities have emerged as a vital part in the social lives of young people. Going beyond its recreational character, these communities are increasingly inter-penetrative of the processes of the constitution of Self. The article argues that many, if not all, actors participating in online communities, have to confront the possibility of the blurring of the real and the virtual selves. It simply has deep implications not only for the persons involved but for the wider society as well. Violence, affection, confidence and similar social experiences often spill over from the virtual to real making online communities' sites for creating social consequences for a wide cross-section of the people and eventually the wider society.

This work is a humble attempt to glimpse the potential of the very many social processes that are set in motion when young people participate in these virtual communities. We argue that they have the potential to influence the very constitution of self in the real world both with desirable and undesirable consequences. With rapidly developing technology expanding the scope and range of participation in the multiverse, it is important to reflect upon the sociological implications for the processes of development of self.

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