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MSc Thesis

**“Beyond the Binary:**

**Challenging and Reinforcing Gender Norms in Virtual Worlds through the  
Virtual Body”**

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# Abstract

In recent years, virtual reality (VR) seems to be occupying an increasing part of the public discourse and becoming more and more present in people's daily lives, transforming multiple fields such as labor, education and the economy. From this tendency, Virtual Worlds (VR) are emerging as social spaces of prominent importance. This secondary research studies conversations around gender performativity in Virtual Worlds using the virtual body, i.e. the avatar, as an analytical axis. The findings demonstrate virtual worlds as fields of conformity and reproduction of gender norms and patriarchal standards, but also as fields of resistance and subversion. Through a systematic literature review, this research aims to contribute to broader debates in gender theory and digital culture.

**Keywords:** Avatar, gender, embodiment, performativity, virtual reality, virtual worlds, Metaverse

# Περίληψη

Τα τελευταία χρόνια η εικονική πραγματικότητα (VR) φαίνεται να καταλαμβάνει όλο και μεγαλύτερο μέρος του δημόσιου λόγου και να γίνεται όλο και πιο παρούσα στις καθημερινές ζωές των ανθρώπων μετασχηματίζοντας πολλαπλά πεδία όπως η εργασία, η εκπαίδευση και η οικονομία. Από αυτή την τάση, οι εικονικοί κόσμοι (Virtual Worlds) αναδύονται ως κοινωνικοί χώροι εξέχουσας σημασίας. Η παρούσα δευτερογενής έρευνα μελετά τις συνομιλίες γύρω από την επιτελεστικότητα των φύλων στους εικονικούς κόσμους (Virtual Worlds) χρησιμοποιώντας ως αναλυτικό άξονα το εικονικό σώμα, δηλαδή το avatar. Τα ευρήματα καταδεικνύουν τους εικονικούς κόσμους ως πεδία συμμόρφωσης και αναπαραγωγής έμφυλων νορμών και πατριαρχικών προτύπων αλλά, παράλληλα, και ως πεδία αντίστασης και ανατροπής. Μέσω μιας συστηματικής βιβλιογραφικής ανασκόπησης, η παρούσα έρευνα στοχεύει να συμβάλει σε ευρύτερες συζητήσεις στη θεωρία του φύλου και τον ψηφιακό πολιτισμό.

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** Άβαταρ, φύλο, σωματικότητα, επιτελεστικότητα, εικονική πραγματικότητα, εικονικοί κόσμοι, Μετασύμπαν

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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In recent decades, virtual reality (VR) has gained accelerating popularity, emerging once again<sup>1</sup> as a topic of interest not only in pop culture but also among a diverse range of experts. From internet memes and TV news reports to newspaper articles, academic publications, and scientific conferences, virtual reality has a prominent presence in cultural production. Following the COVID-19 crisis, we have witnessed a growing integration and normalization of the use of virtual and “hybrid” technologies into the everyday lives of many individuals, transforming numerous fields of society, including politics, labor, healthcare, education, and dating.

Some authors (Golding, 2019; Harley, 2020; Egliston & Carter, 2022; Blackman, 2024) posit that the recent popularity of virtual reality began in 2014, with Facebook’s \$2 billion purchase of Oculus, a VR startup company focusing on gaming. This move aimed to introduce virtual reality technologies to the market as consumer products and to utilize them as “social software.” Indeed, both Facebook’s public discourse and that of other large companies that followed suit placed a greater emphasis on the social dimensions of VR than on its potential for gaming (Egliston & Carter, 2022, p. 4; Egliston & Carter, 2021, pp. 5-6). This emphasis was also evident in the parallel creation of Oculus Research, a mixed reality research group (Freedman, 2020, as cited in Egliston & Carter, 2021, p. 6), which in 2020 was renamed Facebook Reality Labs (FRL). By 2021, Facebook had hired 17,000 employees and had invested \$10 billion in FRL that year alone (Egliston & Carter, 2021, p. 6; Vanian & Levy, 2023, as cited in Mosco, 2023, p. 165). At the same time, Facebook underwent a rebranding

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<sup>1</sup> For overviews of VR’s re-emergence, see Chesher (1994), Golding (2019), and Harley (2024).

process, adopting the name “Meta,” publicly expressing a more pronounced shift towards virtual reality and attempting to identify with the creation and domination of the networked virtual worlds known as the “Metaverse” (Blackman, 2024, p. 405; Mosco, 2023, p. 165; Gorichanaz, 2023, p. 7).

Indeed, along with the recent rise of immersive VR, there has been an increased activity in virtual worlds, which are becoming fields of a wide range of applications. Investors, governments, educational institutions, and businesses are using virtual worlds. The latter tend to use them for employee training purposes and recruiting. Large firms either develop “intraverses,” i.e., privately owned virtual worlds, or sub-sections of them, to relocate their production and investment activities there and “to support globally distributed work and communication” (Jennings 2008, as cited in Schultze and Orlikowski, 2010, p. 811). An example is ProtoSphere<sup>2</sup>, a software aimed at businesses and designed to provide them with 3D immersive virtual environments to host their activities. ProtoSphere has been used by BP for “strategy planning, global working, and mentoring” (Riley 2007, as cited in Schultze and Orlikowski, 2010, p. 811). Second Life, one of the biggest and most popular virtual worlds, has also been implied for similar reasons by companies, organizations, and governmental institutions. One prime example is NASA’s virtual island in Second Life, developed to host innovative space applications (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, p. 811). More recently, Roblox has also been a site of such activity as the multinational retail company Walmart<sup>3</sup>, and the fashion brand Gucci<sup>4</sup> launched virtual stores in the virtual world.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://science2society.eu/content/protosphere>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.roblox.com/games/13398230007/New-Cart-Upgrades-Walmart-Discovered>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gucci.com/us/en/stories/article/gucci-town-on-roblox?srltid=AfmBOoob8CpOZRiUrNO1Mh4yERAHLAL7UGdpzGewZDYPjFyBlqmnneVB>



In a striking statement, Meta’s CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, stated that the Metaverse is associated with “a time when basically immersive digital worlds become the *primary* [emphasis added] way that we live our lives and spend our time” (Canales 2022, as cited in Mosco, 2023, p. 161). By 2022, Horizon Worlds, Meta’s online virtual reality game, had a total of 300,000 users, while at the same time, two other similar virtual worlds were created: Horizon Works, designed for hosting business-related meetings, and Horizon Venues, designed for hosting online concerts and conferences (Mosco, 2023, p. 165). In addition, it has been estimated that by 2030, the Metaverse will be worth approximately \$8-13 trillion and host around 5 billion users who will “live, work and play in these new immersive spaces” (Canny, 2022, as cited in Mosco, 2023, p. 162).

We carry our culture with us wherever we go. So, if a large part of human activity is indeed to be transferred to virtual worlds, that might also be the case for ideologies, political relations, and relations of power. If we habitually and unconsciously tend to reproduce deeply rooted and naturalized cultural structures in our everyday lives and transfer them to various social settings, then there is a high chance that this will also occur online. And, as the literature indicates, it does (see Taylor, 2002; Bainbridge, 2007; Fullerton et al., 2008; Consalvo, 2008; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008; Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Nardi, 2010; Martey & Consalvo, 2011; Woods, 2021). Etymologically, the term “virtual” refers to masculinity since it derives from the Latin “vir,” which means “man,” and “virtus,” which refers to “manliness, valor, worth” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 139). As Dan Golding notes, “the image of virtual reality is not that of mediated paradise at all: it is one of the performance and exhibition of the apparatus along gendered lines (Golding, 2019, p. 11). Digital space and especially

virtual worlds and gamespaces are “overwhelmingly Western, Cartesian and male” (Fullerton et al., 2008, p. 2).

As these virtual environments become an increasingly integral part of everyday life, they may influence contemporary perceptions and realizations of gender, embodiment, and subjectivity. The motivation for this thesis is derived from the recognition of virtual worlds as important places of sociality in cyberspace and the desire to understand how virtual worlds can serve as sites of both conformity and resistance to gender norms and hierarchies. Focusing on scholarly discussions within the social sciences and by using the virtual body as an analytical axis, this thesis attempts to raise questions about the nature of gender performance and the ways in which virtual spaces reproduce, reinforce, and/or challenge traditional gender norms and investigate how the constitution of gender and gender relations in virtual worlds differ, if at all, from the physical world.

These particular environments were selected because virtual worlds are the primary space in which avatars exist. In the context of this thesis, the point was not to see in-depth case studies in a particular virtual setting (something undoubtedly vital in social research) but to observe tendencies, patterns, and a general modus operandi of gender performance through the virtual body. The focus here is on the avatar, i.e., the virtual body and the space in which it exists. By undertaking a comprehensive review of the relevant primary literature and drawing appropriate conclusions, this thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on gender theory and digital culture and to provide insights pertinent to academic research and applicable to practical situations in technological design and policymaking.

The structure of the thesis goes as follows: The first section of this thesis establishes the theoretical framework by analyzing the interrelations between gender,

body, and space and how these elements mutually constitute and influence one another. The second section provides familiarization with the concepts of virtual worlds, discusses the interplay between the virtual and the actual, and presents links between virtual embodiment and the constitution of identity. The third section, methodology, delineates the research methods and approaches utilized in the study, ensuring a transparent and rigorous analytical process. In the fourth section, the thesis examines the performance of gender through virtual bodies, addressing key themes, including the development of virtual bodies, appearance-based stereotypes, sexuality, behavioral stereotypes, male dominance, and harassment. The final section explores alternative gender performances, focusing on practices such as gender swapping and the subversion of traditional gender norms.



## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

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Performative theory originates from John Austin's work (Austin, 1962) and "rests on a linguistic understanding of action" (Schultze, 2014, p. 86). By giving the example of "speech acts," Austin expressed that words can do things. He claimed that some utterances, which he called "performative," are not just statements that simply describe facts but also constitute acts. For example, the statement "I pronounce you husband and wife" is a classic example of such an utterance. Likewise, saying "I promise" is simultaneously saying and making that promise while saying it. Later, Judith Butler, heavily influenced by Austin's theory, elaborated on the performative constitution of subjectivity and particularly gendered identity (Tseëlon, 2003, p. 9). As articulated by Butler, performative theory suggests that gender is not an inherent, unaltered, and static essence of beings simply expressed from inwards to outwards. Instead, it comes into being through performance, i.e., "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p. 519), both material and discursive.

Contrary to phenomenological models and the earlier theatrical model of performance by Erving Goffman, "which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various 'roles' within the complex social expectations of the 'game' of modern life," Butler suggested that the self is externally constructed, shaped and regulated in social discourse and norms (Butler, 1988, p. 528). It must be clarified that gender, for Butler, is not a performance; it is, though, performative. As they explain, "the 'performative' dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance" (Butler,

2011/1993, p. 59). There is not an “authentic” self that hides behind the “mask” of gender, nor is gender just an act that we can drop just any moment. Butler’s performative model “obliterates the distance between the ‘person’ and the ‘act.’ The act becomes part of the stylistic device that produces the substance: performance is identity” (Tseëlon, 2003, p. 10).

Therefore, identities, especially gendered ones, do not preexist their performances; they are as they are done. The gendered self is not prior to its acts (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Thus, identities should not be understood as the source but rather as the effect of these performances (Hickey-Moody & Wood, 2008, as cited in Schultze, 2014, p. 86). As Butler explains, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990/2006, p. 34). Repetition is the “most important mechanism in the cultural reproduction of identity. It is through these repeated acts that gendered subjects are born” (Eklund, 2011, p. 235) and come to be known as either men and women, “males” and “females.”

It is not possible, then, to conceptualize gendered identity as disembodied. “The concept of embodied identity [...] suggests that cultural norms and expectations are quite literally written upon people’s bodies in ways that enable and constrain who they can be” (Trethewey, 1999, as cited in Schultze, 2014, p. 85). For Butler, gender is “a corporeal field of culture” (Butler, 1988, p. 531), a culturally situated materiality upon which “categories such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, religious affiliation, and even class [...] get mapped” (Christopher Breu, 2016, p. 66). Gendered identity is established like any other through bodily performances, or, as Butler calls it, “stylization of the body” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). This stylization consists of acts ranging from how we present ourselves to how we exist within space.

However, we must not fall to the assumption that these acts are “conscious, willed and staged.” Rather, a performative approach regards them as “the unconscious enactments of mundane, everyday practices that replicate and ultimately subject the individual to cultural regimes (Strozier, 2002 as cited in Schultze, 2014, p. 86). A “performative habitus,” one could say, that continuously (re)establishes and normalizes these regimes and situates individuals. From everyday choices regarding garments, bodily adornments, and makeup to movements, gestures, poses, use of language, and so on, these acts create the illusion that they are expressing, perhaps even without our control, our supposed inherent nature. Through their repetition, gender is fabricated as the essence of our selfhood, and the naturalized binary distinction of bodies is established.

As we know from the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in binary oppositions, and especially in contrastive pairs, one element is always positively charged and the other negatively, leading to the one being privileged and the other devaluated (see Lévi-Strauss, 1963/1958, 1966/1962, 1969/1964, 1973/1966, 1978/1968, 1981/1971). Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir (1974/1949) or the anthropologists Sherry Ortner (1974), Carol MacCormack, and Marilyn Strathern (1980) appropriated this idea and linked it to gender binarism. Additionally, Judith Butler further criticized the naturalized male/female binarism, which is based on assumed biological differences and anatomical discrimination that construct female and male bodies. As they explain, it is a relation that promotes, perpetuates, and is fed by hierarchy (Butler, 2006/1990, p. 50).

The body is an embodiment of cultural elements that transfer meaning. Hence, gender and body co-constitute each other. Like many other theorists, Judith Butler has been influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who did not approach the body as a

singular entity to be examined independently. Instead, Merleau-Ponty saw it not as “a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by its task and situation” (Merleau-Ponty 1962/1945, as cited in Boellstorff, 2011, p. 514). Drawing from de Beauvoir (1974/1949) and Merleau-Ponty (1962/1945), Butler agrees that the body is a constant process of materialization of “certain cultural and historical possibilities” (Butler, 1988, p. 521), i.e., the predetermined notions of “man” and “woman” and their expected qualities.

The body is always a gendered body, “only known through its gendered appearance” (Butler, 1988, p. 523). In the context of an optocentric culture like our own, appearance, as visual signaling, holds great importance regarding identity expression and constitution. “Since appearance can often be interpreted by other people, bodies can be used as a way of presenting a particular identity to the world, and for some bodies can become conscious ‘body projects’ to manipulate this means of representing identity to others .... Foucault describes this process of altering one’s body to create an identity as a ‘technology of self’” (Phoenix 2007, as cited by Childs, 2011, p. 18). Hence, appearance is practice, whether it is conscious or unconscious. It is “a situated, bodily practice that is discursive and practical and functions as a set of codes that communicate nonverbally to contribute to group identities including those based on sexuality, gender, class, race, and other factors” (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 166). The public nature of this visual signaling facilitates the establishment of identities since the very gaze of the viewer (or its internalization) facilitates the objectification and confirmation of the existence of the object being gazed upon—in this case, the gendered body.

Gender is, at the same time, “a public action and a performative act” (Butler, 1988, p. 526). The fact that this act is performed publicly reinforces gender identity.



Butler situates gender “in external space, in both individual performative acts and the physical environment. When the body publicly articulates the social relationships of a certain time and place, the space in which the articulation occurs becomes the site of cultural inscription” (Wrede, 2015, p. 10). These performances, however, are not just enacting identities but are themselves articulations of hierarchies and (re)establish patriarchal relations every time they are repeated. “This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler, 2006/1990, p. 191). Only in this context of power relations does the body gain meaning (Butler, 2006/1990, p. 125).

The body, however, does not exist in vacuo. In addition to being gendered, the body is always a “spatial body” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 195), and “embodiment is always emplacement” (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 512). It is, therefore, imperative that the understanding of the gendered body goes along with the understanding of the social construction of space. The latter demands the detachment of space from geo-centric perceptions. Space is not a mere physical continuum bound to three or four dimensions surrounding beings and entities. Rather, it is, like the body, a relational process, a continuously changing, dynamic, interactive, and ongoing production, not stable but temporal, characterized by multiplicity, complexity, and heterogeneity. It is the sphere into which social action occurs, and possibilities materialize, always under construction since it comes into being through embedded material practices (Massey, 2005, p. 9) or, in other words, performances.

Regarding a performative approach to space, Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose note that, just like identities, spaces “do not preexist their performances, [...] rather, specific performances bring these spaces into being. And, since these performances are themselves articulations of power, of particular subject positions, then we maintain that

we need to think of spaces too as performative of power relations” (Gregson & Rose, 2000, p. 441). Thus, “space is never neutral but [...] both created and articulated through cultural discourse, including gender discourse. [...] We cannot grasp space outside a socially mediated perspective” (Wrede, 2015, p. 11). Gender and space are “culturally specific ideas, in terms both of the conceptual nature of that construction and of its substantive content” (Massey, 2009/1994, p. 2). Space is not just influenced by gender, rather, gender, as “a determining factor in cultural production” (Massey, 2009/1994, p. 238) is a structural component of space. At the same time, space not only shapes the construction of gender but also our understanding of it (Massey, 2009/1994, p. 186).

# Chapter 3: Background

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## 3.1 VIRTUAL WORLDS AND THEIR INHABITANTS

Virtual worlds are “computer-based, simulated, persistent environments that support synchronous interaction between users personified as avatars” (Parris 2008, as cited in Schultze and Orlikowski, 2010, p. 810). In short, they are shared online virtual environments where people can interact with each other or with virtual objects. The term “virtual world” applies to various environments, from online games to social platforms<sup>5</sup> (Schultze & Rennecker, 2007, pp. 337-338). Contemporary virtual worlds can be two-dimensional (2D) or three-dimensional (3D) (see Figures 1 and 2). Some 3D virtual worlds can also be immersive, meaning participants can enter them via VR technology<sup>6</sup>. In these worlds, people can engage in almost any form of human activity, from just talking to each other to dancing, sleeping, eating, working, having sex, performing theatrical acts, and so on (Stendal et al., 2011, as cited in Davis & Chansiri, 2019, p. 493). Most have their own economies with distinct virtual currencies, some of which can be exchanged for actual currencies like dollars, euros, etc. (Bainbridge, 2007, p. 472).

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<sup>5</sup> There is no consensus as to the exact content of the term. Some authors tend to include online games in the definition of virtual worlds, while others tend to limit their application only to social platforms. For the purpose of this thesis, I chose the more inclusive term as I think it best captures the centrality of sociality in these environments.

<sup>6</sup> VR technology consists of special equipment such as headsets, gloves, and suits, all equipped with sensors to track body motions and transform them into data, later used to create the avatars.



**Figure 1:** Example of a 2D virtual world: Habbo.



**Figure 2:** Example of a 3D virtual world: World of Warcraft (WoW) (Screenshot taken on 17/8/24).

Before someone enters a virtual world, the first thing they must do, along with creating a username, is to create their avatar, a graphical model that usually resembles a humanoid body and less often an animal-like or other kind of figure. The avatar is a technological artifact, controlled via a combination of the PC keyboard and mouse or

by a gaming controller, by which users can navigate virtual worlds and establish contact with other users who are present in the same manner through their avatars (Peachey & Childs, 2011, p. 1). Each avatar is typically controlled by one person at a time<sup>7</sup> and “acts as a digital body” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 129), which may or may not resemble the user’s actual body. It is commonly perceived as a representation of the user (and sometimes the only way of existing) in a virtual space, which cannot be inhabited by the physical body (Stanney, 2002, p. 313; Kafai et al., 2010; See also Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008). According to Ragnhild Tronstad, the avatar serves a dual purpose: “On the one hand, it represents the player vis-a-vis other players in the game. On the other hand, it functions as a tool for the player’s agency in the game” (Tronstad, 2008, p. 264). Verbal communication between avatars consists of typed chat messages or the use of voice channels. Non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, gestures, interaction with objects, and even avatar proximity, is also present in both conscious and unconscious ways.

The term “avatar” has religious roots. It is derived from the Sanskrit “avatārah”, which is a compound word composed of “ava” (down) and “tarata” (he crosses). In the context of Hinduism, it refers to the incarnation of a deity, which is usually Vishnu, in the physical world. However, in virtual worlds, as Tom Boellstorff aptly points out, digital avatars (also known as “personas”) are understood to represent “the opposite movement from actual to virtual, a decarnation or invirtualisation” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 128). Some authors, analogously to Hinduism, approach avatars as mere tools, having “no perceptible identity of their own” (Tronstad, 2008, p. 267) and as “animistic spirit vessels in a vast system of digitally encoded events” (Isdale et al., 2002, p. 530). Others

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<sup>7</sup> There are, however, exceptions to this. Tom Boellstorff, in his ethnographic research in the virtual world of Second Life (Boellstorff, 2008), encounters instances where an avatar is controlled collaboratively by multiple people or by taking turns. However, this is not as frequent.

(Balsamo, 1996; Heim, 1998; Taylor, 2003; Boellstorff, 2008) oppose this approach and criticize it as rooted in the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy, a contrastive pair that favors the mental over the physical.

Virtual worlds are “complex, multiple, relational, and interconnected” social spaces (Blackman, 2024, p. 417) whose networked nature brings together individuals that, in other cases, would never meet. They must not be equated with games, despite the fact that “they have been and continue to be shaped by video games” (Boellstorff, 2010, p. 127) or that some games like MMORPGs are virtual worlds, often referred to as “game-based worlds.” According to Richard Bartle, “even the ones written to be games aren’t games. People can play games in them, sure, and they can be set up to that end, but this merely makes them venues. The Pasadena Rose Bowl is a stadium, not a game” (Bartle 2004, as cited by Boellstorff, 2008, p. 22). An equation between games and virtual worlds would result in a vague definition of “games,” an approach to virtual worlds which lacks the necessary emphasis to their social dimensions, or both (Boellstorff, 2010, p. 127).

As Orlando Woods (2021) notes, “gamespaces [and virtual worlds in general] are, by definition, spaces that are brought into being relationally” (Woods, 2021, p. 6). They should not, however, be perceived as just “computerized platforms accommodating participants in a virtual space” (Webb, 2001, p. 564), nor as mere mediations, but as “places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet” (Boellstorff, 2010, p. 126). These are places “into which people bring their past experiences and intentions, often reworking and generating meanings beyond the scope of design or intended use” (Blackman, 2024, p. 418). And indeed, an intended use there is.

Virtual worlds are intended worlds. *Every* aspect of them, from code to graphics to systems architecture, is designed by human agents: the programmers and the designers (Taylor, 2003, p. 25). This affects all users' experiences and how they happen within this context. "Beyond the organizational, technical, and economic factors that come into play, there is a fundamental fact that worlds are generally designed with something in mind" (Taylor, 2003, p. 28). These pre-made worlds possess specific limitations and possibilities that affect both the user's relationship with the software and with other users. Some virtual worlds do offer their users a significant amount of freedom in creating their own content; however, their agency is always limited in some sense, as their experiences and choices are predetermined. The potential freedom or constraint given to the users by the world is also intended since the software is human-made. "If code embeds possibilities and constraints, it does so because someone made it so" (Taylor, 2003, p. 25).

As Taylor (2003) poignantly makes us realize, even though code might seem to have an "independent nature" and virtual worlds just appear to be "there," that is not the case as they are products of political decisions and "organizational structures, design imperatives, and economic considerations" (Taylor, 2003, p. 26). In this manner, virtual worlds are embedded with their creator's values, and human agency runs through them. However, developers are predominantly male (Consalvo, 2008). It is not surprising, therefore, that virtual worlds have been based upon male conceptualizations of space (Fullerton et al., 2008, p. 9) and that they often contain "elements particularly disturbing to women" (Nardi, 2010, p. 166) such as vulgar language and sexual violence against women, a point that will be further developed later.

When studying the virtual body, one should always bear in mind that avatars are bodies created by someone else (at least in terms of script) and that this might have

many implications in avatar-user, avatar-avatar, and avatar-object interactions (Schultze, 2014, p. 88). Designers' biases and conceptions of bodies and gender are transferred to the virtual world as this literal construction of virtual bodies is "laden with hopes, values and limitations" (Taylor, 2003, p. 32). A performative approach to virtual worlds necessitates the understanding that they are enacted both by the developers and by the users who perform them "through their actions [...], movements and interactions" (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, p. 815).

### **3.2 VIRTUALITY AND REALITY**

Unlike what is maybe the popular opinion, "physical" and "virtual" are not antonyms analogous to "real" and "fake." As Taylor often demonstrates in her work, "what happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants" (Taylor, 2006, p. 19). Virtual worlds are just as material as physical ones. Drawing from Deleuze, Boellstorff emphasizes that "the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual" (Deleuze, 2004, as cited in Boellstorff, 2008, p. 21). The virtual, therefore, might not be tangible, but it is real. Emerging from a large corpus of literature is the epistemological position that the dualistic distinction between "real" and "non-real" space may be more limiting than helpful in approaching virtuality. Similarly to Massey, James Ash and Lesley Gallacher note that "virtual worlds do not sit alongside the real world; they are themselves 'real' worlds, which are brought into being through material practices and technologies" (Ash & Gallacher, 2011, p. 358) In other words, performed.

Hegemonic perceptions rule virtual space just as they do with the physical. As spaces, they are linked to each other (Wrede, 2015, p. 13; Eklund, 2011, p. 339) and connected in many intricate ways, as they are embedded by norms and hierarchies very similar (if not the same) to the physical world. According to Massey, "the world of



physical space and the world of electronically mediated connection do not exist as somehow two separate layers, one [...] floating ethereally somewhere above the materiality of the other” (Massey, 2005, p. 96). Virtual space is to be perceived neither as a “parallel dimension” governed by its own rules nor as an exact copy of physical space. While offline reality does “precede and frame the virtual” (Webb, 2001, p. 564), the “online” and the “offline” are two interwoven spheres that also contain unique phenomena and possibilities (Taylor, 2006, p. 19). A distinction between offline and online worlds can “depoliticize and mask the very real and uneven power relationships between different groups of people” (Graham, 2013, p. 180).

“Conceptual binaries such as immersion/non-immersion or real/virtual are performed boundaries rather than essential properties or clear-cut demarcations” (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, as cited in Blackman, 2024, p. 406). Especially regarding the concept of immersion, which has been thoroughly criticized (Blackman, 2024), Taylor states that it is “through the use of a body as material in the dynamic performance of identity and social life that users come to be ‘made real’ -that they come to experience immersion” (Taylor, 2002, p. 42). Thus, “presence enacts itself as an embodied activity” (Taylor, 2002, p. 44). Feminist thinkers have also criticized spatial divisions regarding the contrastive binary of public and private space (see Massey, 2009, chapter 9). Similarly, “geographers have criticized this binary embedded in concepts such as cyberspace, virtual space, or attempts to hybridize the virtual with the real, and how they remain problematic by reifying a discrete separation between virtual and actual” (Blackman, 2024, pp. 405-406).

“Ultimately, places can never have ontological security and they are always ‘of-the-moment, brought into being through practices (embodied, social, technical), always remade every time they are engaged with” (Kitchin and Dodge 2007, as cited in

Graham, 2013, p. 180). Therefore, virtual worlds, the environments in which this research is situated, can be approached in the same manner. According to Ash (2009), (game-based) virtual worlds offer both “an existential and an ecological form of space to their users” (Ash, 2009, as cited in Ash and Gallacher, 2011, p. 359) that does not, however, preexist their interactions with it. This space exists as long as users experience it, making it “a processual world that actively emerges from the practices of users” (Ash, 2009, as cited in Ash and Gallacher, 2011, p. 359).

The aforementioned serve as theoretical foundations that help in understanding the parallel social construction and constitution of gender, body, and space and highlight the interrelations between them. To see their interconnections through a performative lens provides significant analytical insight, since it helps to understand “reality not as composed of fixed and independent entities, but as constituted by fluid, dynamic, multiple, and emergent phenomena” (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, p. 814). Similarly, this kind of approach is quite helpful in the analysis of virtual reality and virtual worlds, as it highlights the “placeness” of these spaces (Boellstorff, 2008, chapter 4), which are given substance through bodily practices and are “constitutively produced by developers, users, technologies, knowledge, activities, etc.” (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, p. 815). Whether applied to actual or virtual space, a performative approach might challenge our presuppositions of fixity, stability, and inherence of identities that are only waiting to be expressed in various ways. Arguing for a performative approach, Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell (2008) suggest that avatars should not be perceived as mere representations but as subjectivities. A representation, according to them, is a static signifier, whereas “a subjectivity, in contrast, is a living force, an agent that both acts in the world and is constituted in the world through action” (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008, p. 12).

### 3.3 LINKS BETWEEN VIRTUAL EMBODIMENT AND IDENTITY

Most research on identity in virtual worlds has viewed it either as disembodied, an approach subjected to extensive criticism, or as representational, conceptualizing virtual bodies as not “real” (Schultze, 2014, p. 87). However, one cannot stress enough the centrality of embodiment in virtual worlds. If embodiment is the means for the realization of identity (see Schultze, 2014, p. 85), then that applies to virtual worlds as well. “The body is, in one way or another, at the heart of the image of virtual reality” (Golding, 2019, p. 10), and “it is through embodiment that people, places, and things are made concrete and tangible” (Schultze & Rennecker, 2007, p. 344). Virtual worlds, as social spaces, are brought into being relationally and performatively through embodied social practice. These performative acts are made by the avatars, who, as virtual embodiments, “prove to be the material out of which relationships and interactions are embodied” (Taylor, 2002, p. 41) and “become access points in constructing affiliations, socializing, communicating, and working through various selves. They are the material out of which people embody and make themselves real” (Taylor, 2002, p. 60).

Whether we see it from a 3PP “third-person perspective”, like in non-immersive, or an FPP “first-person perspective,” like in immersive virtual environments, the “avatar is the locus of perception and sociality” (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 507) and, thus, it would be incorrect to perceive one form as disembodied and the other as embodied. Through various practices of the virtual body, not just the people but the virtual worlds are made real too (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 129). It is through the (virtual) body that we experience presence in the (virtual) environment and understand ourselves (Riva et al.,

2016, as cited in Kruzan and Won, 2019, p. 1), while at the same time, we signal our presence to others (Schultze & Rennecker, 2007, p. 344; Taylor, 2002, p. 42). Avatars are not only the central artifacts around which sociality in virtual worlds takes place, but it is through virtual embodiment and virtual embodied performances that identities are made (Taylor, 2002, p. 60).

As an element of material culture with great significance, the avatar is an artifact around which identities, practices, and even communities are shaped, oftentimes even extending outside of the virtual world. For many individuals, the avatar is not just a navigational tool and a means of achieving agency within virtual space but serves as the primary way of realizing selfhood and constructing identity online (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 134; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008, p. 14; see also Mystakidis, 2022, p. 491). That is why participants in virtual worlds tend to spend a lot of their time and money (actual and virtual) on customizing their avatars (Taylor, 2002, p. 51; Kafai et al., 2010, p. 24). Changing the appearance of an avatar is a continuous practice of personal expression that makes one unique and “plays a central role in becoming an individual and making the body real” (Taylor, 2002, p. 51). Especially in graphical virtual worlds, appearance, as self-representation, is quite significant (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 129).

Just like the physical body, the virtual body (and its stylization) is the cultural ground onto which gender is inscribed. These performances enacted by both developers and users shape gender in virtual worlds. As Rosa Martey’s and Mia Consalvo’s (2011) research suggests, the choices one makes when customizing their avatar do not have solely individualistic motives. Virtual embodiment is constructed within societal boundaries and incorporates social expectations and interpretations of appearance (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 178). Indeed, Butler has stated that embodiment is a “set of strategies,” a style that is “never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and

that history conditions and limits possibilities” (Butler, 1988, p. 521). According to Taylor, “avatars often become an artifact that teaches this lesson” (Taylor, 2002, p. 56).

Appearance, both in physical and virtual space, is not a mere aesthetic choice but a performance of subjectivity: how one looks determines who they are. It is “creating a specific expression of self with potentially far-reaching effects” (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 168). Especially in virtual worlds, appearance consists of conscious choices that facilitate presenting the self in a desired way (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 130), and the avatar becomes “a central object around which performance of identity is structured” (Taylor, 2002, p. 53). For example, in immersive social VR, “users tend to associate specific actions or postures with particular gender identities” (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 6). Just like in the example of varying sitting animations discussed above, immersive VR users engage in such practices that others later use as signifiers to “decode” their actual gender and make assumptions about their identities (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 6).



## Chapter 4: Methodology

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The process of finding literature was ongoing during the whole period of writing my thesis and was based upon a combination of four methods: keyword searching, expert recommendations, backward and forward citation searching. The first step in gathering a satisfactory initial body of material was to access and search various STS journals suggested by the STS program's website<sup>8</sup>. There, as well as in internationally recognized online academic libraries, platforms and databases<sup>9</sup>, keywords relevant to the topic were used to search for papers. To assist me in the collection of texts, three professors provided me with suggestions but also retrieved papers to which I did not have institutional access through my academic account.

After identifying the texts most pertinent and beneficial to my research, I proceeded to employ the methods of backward and forward citation searching. While generally, I refrained from using literature that was more than two decades old, I used backward citation searching in order to build context, provide comprehensive coverage, and come in contact with important works that shaped and contributed to my field of research. The method of forward citation searching helped me find more "up-to-date" material that captures recent developments in the field and to further enrich my gathered sources.

Through these processes, I identified 285 sources, including scientific articles and books, from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, social and cultural geography, STS, game studies, gender studies, and feminist studies. To ensure the relevance and

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<sup>8</sup> <https://sts.phs.uoa.gr/el/links/>

<sup>9</sup> e.g. <https://journals.sagepub.com>, <https://www.tandfonline.com>, <https://www.jstor.org>, <https://www.academia.edu>, <https://www.heal-link.gr/en/home-2/>

quality of my research, I underwent an evaluation process, based on criteria such as direct relevance to virtual worlds and avatars, the authors' expertise, interdisciplinarity, and the overall contribution to my thesis. Ultimately, 48 sources were considered particularly important, and 26 were selected for in-depth analysis.



# Chapter 5: Avatars performing gender

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## 5.1 DEVELOPING VIRTUAL BODIES

As described earlier, virtual worlds are constructed in a very literal sense. So, when it comes to creating an avatar, this happens within a specific context. The choices users make are based on a predetermined set of characteristics provided by programmers and designers. Users, at least at a very first, basic level, have to settle with whatever the developers provide them with, thus coping with limits both structural and social (Taylor, 2002, p. 60) and having to face “elusive, technical bias” (Pace et al., 2009, p. 16). Gender is always present in virtual worlds (Nardi, 2010, p. 152) but mainly in normative terms. Already from the start, in most avatar creation interfaces, there is a plethora of stereotypical depictions of gendered bodies and reproduction of norms grounded on gender binarism, which seems to predominate virtual worlds (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 140). Lina Eklund argues that, in a sense, virtual bodies are “already performed” for the users. “Their looks, hair, voice, body language have all been pre-programmed into a gender-stereotyped role clearly based on a heterosexual expectancy” (Eklund, 2011, pp. 330- 331).

Frequently, during the avatar creation process, the first thing one is required to do is to select between two given figures: a masculine and a feminine. Though the level of available avatar customization depends on the options that each virtual world offers, often there is also the option to select alternative versions of those two figures (see Figure 3) or to customize the selected body by altering proportions such as height, size of lips, eyes, breasts, etc. by using sliders (see Figure 4). The masculinity or femininity of each figure, on this first, non-verbal and “asocial” level, results from visual cues.

These might be poses, gestures, or exaggerated features that carry specific cultural meaning in the normative perception of gender and will later act as public signaling and transmitters of social messages to other users in virtual worlds.



**Figure 3:** Selection of available body shapes for a masculine avatar. Screenshot taken from the character creation interface of Guild Wars 2 (Taken on 4/7/24).



**Figure 4:** Modifying facial features. Screenshot taken from the character creation interface of Guild Wars 2 (Taken on 4/7/24).

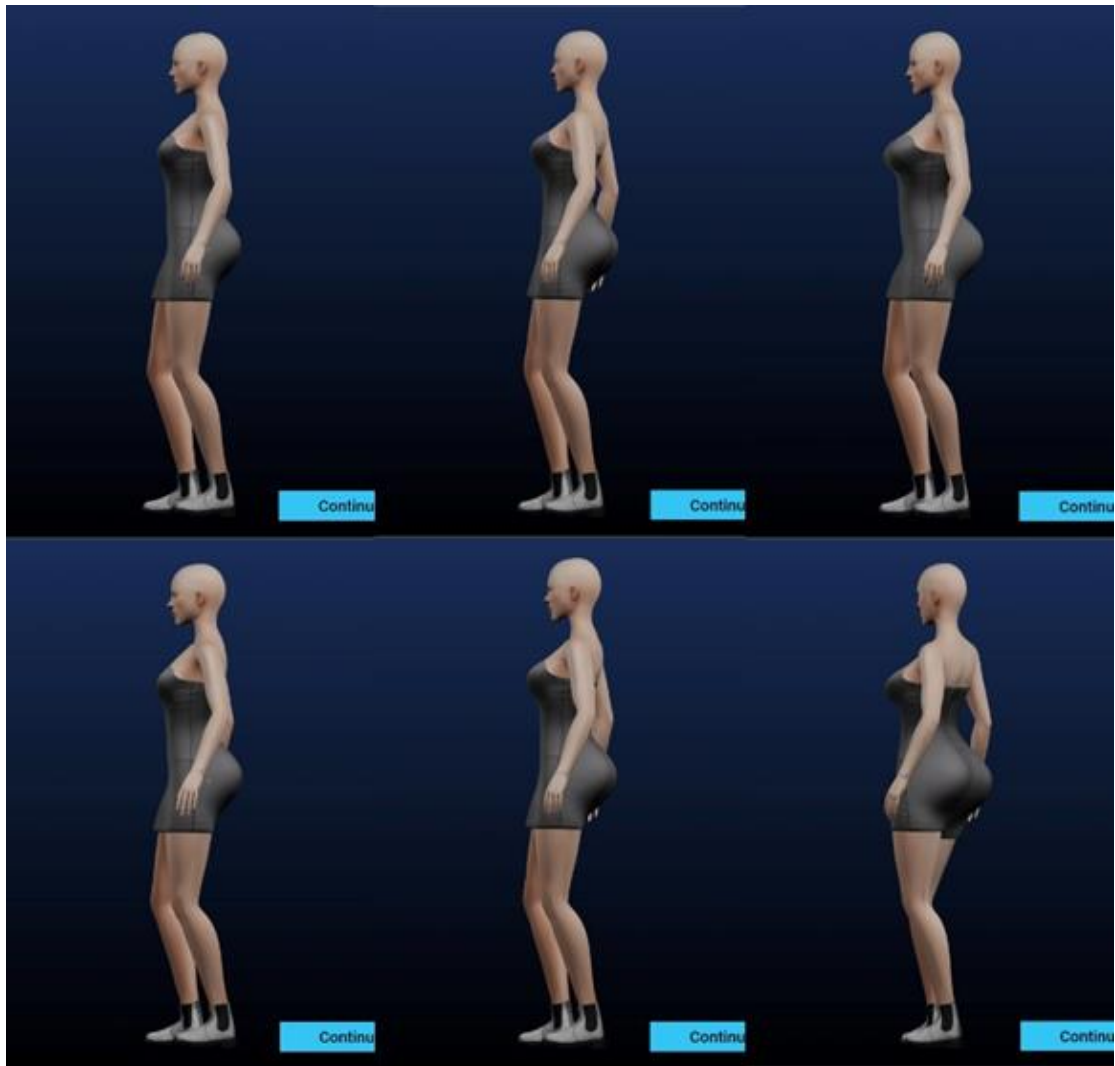
Researchers from various fields (mainly feminist and queer studies) have shown that avatars tend to reproduce dominant beauty standards, norms, and appearance-based stereotypes rooted in male/female binarism (see Webb, 2001; Boellstorff, 2008; Pace et al., 2009; Boellstorff, 2011; Woods, 2021). This contrasting and exaggerated differentiation is mainly present in humanoid avatars. Giving the example of Virtual Places, a virtual world that is now shut down, Stephen Webb comments on the appearance of humanoid avatars and points out that they are “heavily stereotyped along lines of gender and ethnicity,” having stereotypical Caucasian features and being significantly sexualized (Webb, 2001, p. 563). Rosa Martey and Mia Consalvo (2011) confirm this by noting that humanoid avatars are “recognizably Caucasian; most are young and beautiful; most correspond to traditional gender distinctions in shape and dress” (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 165). For example, Second Life gives an extensive range of appearance options via user-generated content, making the possibilities for customization almost infinite since users can make their avatars look like anything from a human to an animal or from an orb of light to a rock. However, the basic options provided by the platform are limited to different versions of a feminine and a masculine humanoid figure (see Figure 5). As shown in Figure 5, all the basic versions of the avatar in Second Life, are in line with Western beauty standards: a skinny feminine body with a small waist, flat belly, large breasts, and glutes in contrast to a toned masculine body with defined muscular arms, legs and abs. Both fit and able-bodied.



**Figure 5:** All of the available body shapes in the avatar creation tool of Second Life (Taken on 4/7/24).

Studies (Webb, 2001; Fron et al., 2007; Nardi, 2010; Eklund, 2011; Woods, 2021) indicate that female avatars tend to be oversexualized by possessing exaggerated and sometimes unrealistic body parts such as large, perky breasts, round glutes with a tiny waist, etc. (see Figures 6 and 7). Sexualization of feminine avatars also comes from fashion, as, frequently, their apparel is quite suggestive (see Figure 8), and they are often dressed in what Celia Pearce has described as “kombat lingerie,” e.g., bikini armor (Fron et al., 2007, p. 19). This over-sexualization is anything from empowering for women as it often makes them feel uncomfortable (Fullerton et al., 2008, p. 4). It is more in favor of the viewer rather than the wearer (Bryce and Rutter, 2003, p. 6). “Female characters tend, therefore, to be designed in ways that satisfy the demands of

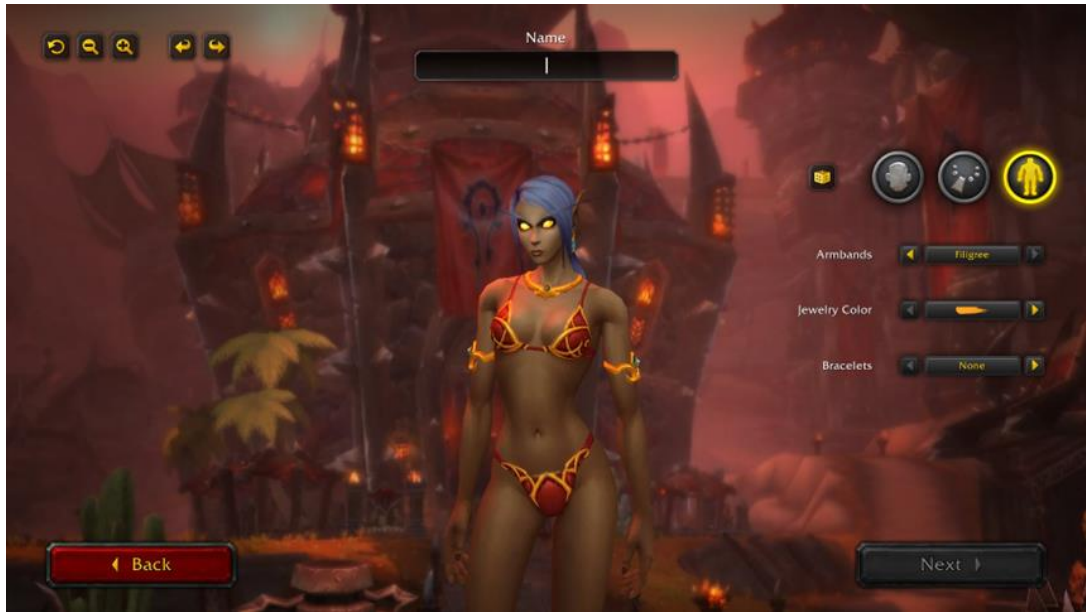
a mostly male player base: they reproduce gender distinctions within the gamespace” (Woods, 2021, p. 3). Virtual worlds, as places of male dominance, reinforce and sustain “a standard gender dynamic, the male gaze<sup>10</sup>” (Nardi, 2010, p. 159).



**Figure 6:** Collage of all the available feminine body shapes in the starting avatar creation tool of Second Life (Created on 4/7/24).

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<sup>10</sup> For a contextualization of the “male gaze” as an analytical term, see Columpar (2002)



**Figure 7:** Customization of a feminine avatar in WoW (Screenshot taken on 17/8/24).



**Figure 8:** A feminine avatar wearing revealing armor. Screenshot from the character creation interface of WoW (Taken on 17/8/24).

The masculine avatar, by default, presents major anatomical differences to a feminine one, making them appear as complete opposites (see Figure 9). For example, in many combat-driven MMORPGs, masculine avatars often possess scars and wounds that indicate a previous fight and strengthen a tough and intimidating appearance. For example, in the very popular MMORPG World of Warcraft (WoW), “sexual dimorphism” predominates the character creation interface (Pace et al., 2009). More specifically, borrowing a term from natural sciences, Tyler Pace et al. comment on gender binarism and note that there are “extreme body type differences” between masculine and feminine avatars. This is expressed in a noticeable difference between the number of customization options given for masculine rather than feminine avatars. Only in the two most anthropomorphic races of the game, the humans and the night elves, do the options given to feminine avatars exceed those of masculine ones due to a wide range of hair and makeup styles. The extra options given here help only to reinforce gender stereotypes and to intensify the difference. In the Undead race, who are former humans, there are equal body options for customization. However, the masculine avatars have nine more facial options, consisting of gruesome and harsh images of missing or broken jaws and eyes (see Figure 10), while the feminine faces are whole and intact (Pace et al., 2009, p. 13). This differentiation might act as an indication that, as opposed to the feminine, the masculine avatars were injured (possibly fatally) during a conflict or battle, reinforcing once again gender archetypes and reproducing the stereotype of the strong, macho, and active male as opposed to the weak, fragile and passive female.



**Figure 9:** Collage of all the available masculine body shapes in the starting avatar creation tool of Second Life (Created on 4/7/24).



**Figure 10:** Screenshot of a masculine undead avatar in the making (Taken on 17/8/24).



Apart from their shape, virtual bodies are gendered also by their animations used for standing, walking, talking, etc. It is common, for example, that dancing animations differ drastically across genders, with feminine ones being “more enticing, sensual and in some instances purely sexual” (Eklund, 2011, p. 331). Another example comes from Second Life, where the default animations for sitting differ for masculine and feminine avatars. Masculine avatars engage in the practice known as “manspreading,” meaning that they sit with their legs spread apart while feminine avatars sit with theirs closed (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 141), an example that highlights the masculinization of virtual space in a very useful way. Attributed to a supposed need for men to keep their legs spread open because of their anatomy, manspreading is a mundane practice of establishing male dominance over public space. By engaging in it, one is taking up more space than women in public (especially in public transport) while at the same time displaying their private parts, which are implied to be of great size, something that holds specific connotations on its own<sup>11</sup>. In cyberspace, there is no such “need” for spreading. However, the practice still remains and is present in various virtual worlds, proving it to be a performative act that reinforces and naturalizes male domination over women.

## **5.2 APPEARANCE-BASED STEREOTYPES ADOPTED BY USERS**

Those above constitute only some of the various ways in which platforms reproduce power relations and exercise restrictions on users regarding their avatars. As Tom Boellstorff notes, “the idea of an avatar usually implies an embodiment that is

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed view on manspreading, see Jane (2017) and Tonnelat and Kornblum (2017, Chapter 6).

intentionally crafted” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 129). As T. L. Taylor explains, this is a dual intentionality, as it derives both from developers and from users (Taylor, 2003). A prime example of the evident articulation of this is, again, the process of customization, where users select between the given options and make a series of conscious choices to create their avatars. Multiple studies examining embodiment in contemporary virtual worlds demonstrate that users tend to accept these restrictions and craft their avatars in line with them (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2008; Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Huh & William, 2010; Martey & Consalvo, 2011).

Gender seems to be performed by the majority of users in equally normative terms by embodying “discursive gendered distinctions” (Golding, 2019, p. 8). When describing the participants in their study, Martey and Consalvo (2011) noted that humanoid avatars, which were most avatars in Second Life, “were almost always identifiably male or female, and gender served as a primary identity marker.” Even animal-like avatars, such as furies<sup>12</sup>, were gendered in pronounced ways. Feminine furies are often dressed in clothing such as skirts or have revealed sexualized bodies like humanoid feminine avatars (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 175). Martey and Consalvo also note that even after the initial customization process of avatars, when users have at their disposal a range of user-created appearance options far wider than those available in the physical world, they still choose to create normative embodiments in order to “fit in.” This means making their avatars conventionally attractive (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 179).

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<sup>12</sup> Furies are members of a community interested in fictional characters which combine traits of humans and animals alike, making them anthropomorphic and zoomorphic at the same time. Members often wear costumes and roleplay as their “fursionas,” i.e. custom characters that represent them in the community.

Even though in virtual worlds, people often create avatars that resemble their actual world bodies, in some environments like Second Life or IMVU<sup>13</sup>, they also tend to spend significant amounts of their resources to create idealized or “enhanced” versions of themselves in terms of attractiveness (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 168). This involves purchasing accessories, clothing, body parts, etc., in order to have an attractive avatar (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 129) that reflects and embodies “dominant actual-world ideals of beauty and status” (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 506). Most avatars are light-skinned, tall, and thin, and gender differentiation takes the forms discussed above: exaggerated feminine and masculine traits, sometimes even more extreme than the basic options provided by the platforms (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 506). This exaggeration suggests that users are doing gender “quite explicitly” (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 175). What is of interest, though, and shows the complexity of beauty standards, is that even users who identify in the actual world as Black, Asian, or Latino oftentimes use “Caucasian-like avatars” (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 179), thus highlighting the lasting impacts of colonialism and the ideological hegemony of the West which creates bodies more important and valuable than others.

Embodying these dominant beauty standards and having a “perfect” body has been told to give freedoms to otherwise marginalized bodies (Fron et al., 2007, p. 19). That is especially true for feminine avatars since their over-sexualization is not imposed solely by the avatar creation interfaces of virtual worlds, but it is also performed by users, not only via a selection of bodies that conform to beauty standards but also via a choice of apparel. Users controlling feminine avatars frequently dress them in revealing clothes, leading to the majority of feminine avatars being “sexually underdressed” (Huh

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<sup>13</sup> <https://secure.imvu.com/>

& William, 2010, p. 165; see also Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 175). “Women players and designers [...] frequently lean towards much sexier clothing than they would wear in real life, taking advantage of the freedoms and anonymity afforded in a virtual world” (Fron et al., 2007, p. 19) which might come from a need of confirmation or by a need for empowerment. However, as will be demonstrated in chapter 5.5, feminine avatars are also controlled by male users, who often dress them in a certain way in order to satisfy their male gaze (Nardi, 2010, p. 159).

### **5.3 SEXUALITY**

From talking, dancing, decorating spaces, attending specific in-world events, and so on, the spectrum of gender performance in virtual worlds is broad. As mentioned, virtual worlds are not disconnected spaces; people bring their past experiences into them. As is with appearance, so too with avatar-avatar and avatar-object interactions, users tend to select and reproduce stereotypes and social roles which reinforce gender binarism, heteronormativity, and overall patriarchal relations (Huh & William, 2010, p. 165). An aspect of online activity that is very rich in such representations and insightful to the study of gender performance in virtual worlds is that of sexuality. In virtual worlds, users “reenact human practices of intimacy” (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008, p. 13). From sitting close, hugging, and holding hands to engaging in sexual practices (Taylor, 2002, p. 49; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008, p. 13), sexuality seems to play an important role in virtual worlds (Eklund, 2011, p. 334; Bardzell & Bardzell, 2006, p. 1), as it “is a common aspect of embodiment online” (Taylor, 2002, p. 50) and a set of practices very insightful to the performance of gender.

Different worlds provide different ranges of opportunities and possible performances. Hence, “depending on the world, the form of sexual activity varies somewhat” (Taylor, 2002, p. 50). In most virtual worlds, there are no default animations or avatar skins containing full nudity. That is why sexual practices performed by avatars either depend on user-generated content (wherever this is allowed) or on their ability to find creative ways to “push back on the system and make more out of it than was originally intended” (Taylor, 2002, p. 51). Taylor provides such an example from her ethnography in DreamScape. At the time of her research, avatar movements were limited to a basic set of non-sexual gestures, including “wave, bow, shrug, present, jump, react, and a special action customized to the particular avatar” (Taylor, 2002, p. 50), so users had to find new ways to achieve their desired results. One way they did that was by positioning their bodies in ways that seemed like they were “holding hands, kissing, or sitting on one another’s laps” (Taylor, 2002, p. 50). They also imitated sexual practices by “bending in front of another avatar (through the “bow” gesture) or using a gesture which, when done in close proximity to another avatar, looks like a pat on the rear” (Taylor, 2002, p. 50).

Another very interesting example is that of fetishist sexual practices, which in virtual worlds can be engaged with more freely. As Bardzell and Bardzell (2006) note, this is due to the fact that performing such acts in virtual environments not only reduces their cost considerably, as participants do not have to invest in expensive equipment but also offers anonymity to users, which makes them feel safer when acting “without the usual social restraints” (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2006, p. 1). However, the most common forms of sexual practice in many virtual worlds are heterosexual and exist within the contexts of “serial monogamy and romance,” while other practices, like BDSM and edgeplay, are marginalized (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 164). To no surprise,

heteronormativity prevails in virtual worlds too, and sexuality is commonly performed within this context. As Eklund notes, referring to the participants of her study, “in their creation of an avatar and their negotiation of the game they create[d] themselves as gendered and sexual beings in the virtual world” (Eklund, 2011, p. 339) but had to embody the developers’ embedded assumptions about femininity and sexuality (Eklund, 2011, p. 338), thus limiting their future options.

#### **5.4 BEHAVIORAL STEREOTYPES**

Gender performance and the embracement or resistance to norms are not limited to looks, body image, default animations, or sexual practices. Users perform their gender in more disguised ways in their day-to-day interactions by re-enacting social and behavioral norms (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 167). Traditional roles of femininity and masculinity are reproduced in various ways, virtual marriages (mostly heterosexual) being an indicative example. For instance, in the popular game *Diablo*, like in many other virtual worlds, it is common practice for male avatars to present feminine avatars with a ring as a way of expressing feelings of commitment (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 155).

Feminine avatars often adopt the role of the “helpless damsel in distress awaiting rescue, or the ‘prize’ for completing game tasks” (Bryce & Rutter, 2003, as cited in Woods, 2021, p. 3), while masculine avatars often adopt a “knight to the rescue” type of role. In game-based virtual worlds, it also is quite common for users who control feminine avatars (usually actual-world women) to choose characters who have supportive roles, such as healing or range fighting. In contrast, users who control masculine avatars tend to choose characters that are involved in more physical forms

of combat (Huh & William, 2010, p. 165), thus, creating a gender division of roles in many MMORPGs.

Drawing from her research in WoW, Lina Eklund describes how all her informants, who identified as women in the actual world, chose to adopt healing and supporting roles, which “focus more on other players than on enemies. The healing classes help other characters – the ones that inflict damage – quite in the manner of the traditional roles women have had in real life warfare”. Through these performances, these users reproduced the traditional roles of women as caregivers. What is of great interest is that, as Eklund describes, while some participants chose their class according to their own preferences, “some of the informants were guided by their gaming boyfriends,” who recommended that their girlfriends choose supporting roles. Eklund describes this instance as being “inside a heterosexual social context where others assist in creating a coherent gender performance that can be understood according to normative values” (Eklund, 2011, p. 329). Eklund also proceeds to describe how one participant’s actual world boyfriend and his friends were mocking her because of her interest in collecting dresses for her avatar, which she found beautiful. She accepted this behavior, although she saw it as “a negative aspect of gaming” (Eklund, 2011, p. 333). It must be noted that collecting different skins and “transmog<sup>14</sup>” items (often limited-edition ones) is a common practice in virtual worlds and acts as an indicator of status. The fact that the user was mocked by her boyfriend and his friends derives from the fact that she collected dresses and not armor.

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<sup>14</sup> Transmogrification (commonly referred to as transmog, tmog, xmog or simply mog) provides the ability to replace the appearance of your armor and weapons with those of other items, or to hide certain pieces of armor (Transmogrification. *In Wowpedia*. Retrieved from <https://wowpedia.fandom.com/wiki/Transmogrification>)

## 5.5 MALE DOMINANCE

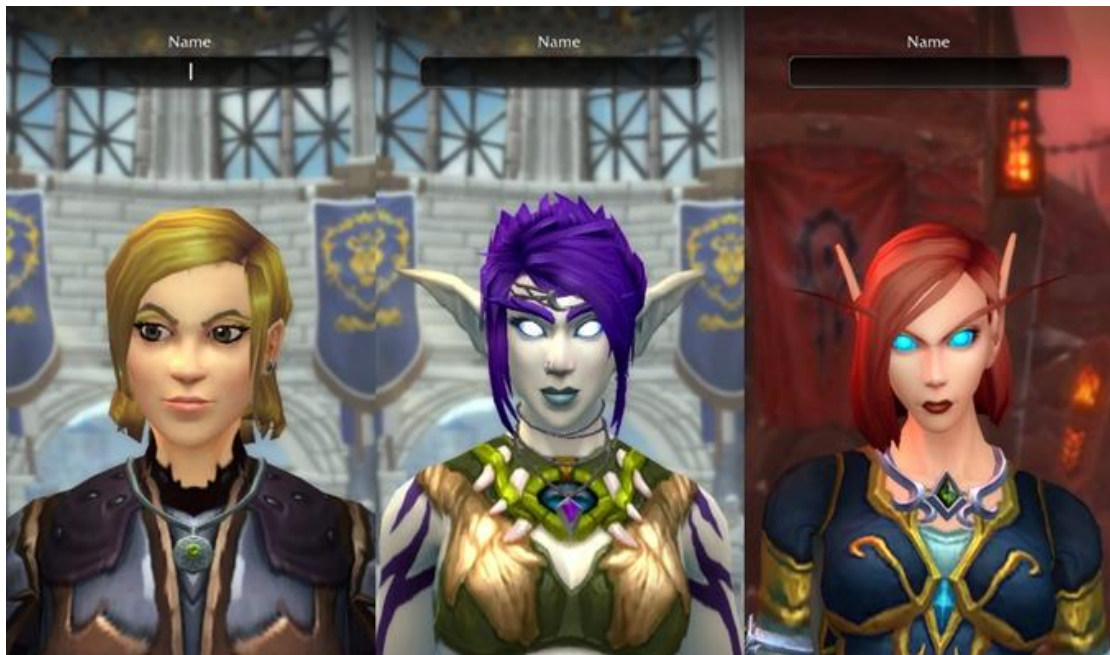
As previously mentioned, immersive and non-immersive virtual worlds are developed mainly by men and target a male audience. As spaces of male dominance, virtual worlds are embedded with male values. For example, most game-based virtual worlds reproduce patriarchal stereotypes and, quite frequently, create masculine themes containing graphic violent or sexual scenes, militaristic elements, and, overall, a competitive atmosphere, which all of these tend to be unappealing to women and limit their motivation for participating (Bryce & Rutter, 2003, p. 6), thus leading to male users outnumbering female users (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Nardi, 2010; Zhang & Juvrud, 2024). Being the majority, this means that virtual worlds are run, in one way or another, by their rules. This is quite apparent in the discourse practices that are taking place.

Homosociality often regulates the use of language in virtual worlds and creates the effect of what Bonnie Nardi characterized as a “boy’s tree house,” providing the space for the use of language typically prohibited in many actual world settings to be articulated. It is not rare that conversations between men, either via text or voice channels, contain aspects of toxic masculinity and machismo, such as sexualized, homophobic, violent, and overall insensitive and intimidating language. As Bonnie Nardi reports from her ethnographic research in WoW: “Male players casually mentioned things like blow jobs and buttsex. They spoke of raping, or being raped by, mobs or players in battlegrounds and arenas. They used words such as douche bag, pussy, cunt, and pimp. The term gay was a generically derisive (and liberally invoked) adjective. Males called players fag, faggot, or homo if displeased or as a joke. Male players sometimes taunted other males by referring to them as ‘little girls’” (Nardi, 2010, p. 153). Tom Boellstorff’s (2008) findings from his ethnographic research in



Second Life confirm this. He described a conversation between a card-playing group of men in a casino where they were making “references to girlfriends and wives [theirs], joking about bodily functions [defecating and urinating], and talk[ed] of ‘getting crazy’ by going to a stripper show” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 143). Boellstorff concluded that all of these interactions “reinforced the idea that these residents were heterosexual men in the actual world” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 143). As Nardi suggests, female players do not express themselves in these ways and are generally “more conservative in speech” (Nardi, 2010, p. 153).

Besides setting the rhetorical practices, male users also establish their dominance in other ways. As described earlier, feminine avatar bodies often contain elements that satisfy the male gaze. By the time of Nardi’s research, it was common practice in WoW for male players to go “girl watching”: “a significant aspect of the visual experience of play” (Nardi, 2010, p. 159). This translated to male users getting together to gaze upon feminine avatars, mainly of the races perceived as attractive (Humans, Night Elves, and Blood Elves) (see Figure 11), while avatars of other races (Dwarves and Orcs) (see Figure 12) “were rarely seen” (Nardi, 2010, p. 159). However, these things do not always go unanswered. As Nardi describes, some female players opposed these practices by teasing male users about their attraction towards Elves. Others ignored these behaviors or stood their ground by stating their limits (Nardi, 2010, p. 161).



**Figure 11:** Human, Night Elf, and Blood Elf. Screenshot of three randomly generated feminine avatars (Taken on 17/8/24).



**Figure 12:** Dwarf and Orc. Screenshot of two randomly generated feminine avatars (Taken on 17/8/24).

## 5.6 HARASSMENT

### **\*Trigger Warning\***

The following section contains descriptions of incidents of sexual assault and harassment. Readers who may find this content distressing are advised to proceed with caution or skip this section if necessary.

In her ethnographic research in the virtual world DreamScape, Taylor studied virtual embodiment not only as fundamental to subjectivity and the construction of identities but also to establishing relations between users. She posited that the distance, proximity, or the direction to which avatars are facing, all play an essential part in non-verbal communication, transferring social meaning and establishing relations between avatars (Taylor, 2002; also see Schultze & Rennecker, 2007, p. 344; Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, pp. 811-812). Through these performances, a sense of personal space and boundaries around the virtual body is created (Becker & Mark, 1999, as cited in Taylor, 2002, p. 42). As aforementioned, Participants of virtual worlds often use these communicational tools to express intimacy and familiarity. Avatars let close to them those whom they trust and feel comfortable with and with which they engage in various bodily practices (Taylor, 2002, p. 49).

However, as in the actual, so too in virtual worlds, a crossing of personal boundaries is common practice for establishing and enforcing dominance over one's body. Indeed, harassment in virtual spaces is far from absent, and it can take many forms: physical (avatar-targeted), sexual, verbal, psychological, and so on. Invading personal space can also be a form of intimidation to which people can respond either by moving away or by standing their ground (Taylor, 2002, p. 43). Figure 13, a screenshot captured by Taylor, illustrates such an interaction.



**Figure 13:** Taylor’s screenshot from DreamScape. Original caption: “Avatar confrontation” (Taylor, 2002, p. 43).

As Taylor describes: “one user has ‘gotten in another’s face’ during an online argument. The confrontation is played out in the position of their avatars. The text above the avatars is their speech. While one group in the middle is carrying on a separate conversation, the two people on the right are having an increasingly volatile argument” (Taylor, 2002, p. 43). In this scene, both avatars stand their ground in a space where they are visible to others, something that is perhaps linked to their gendered identities, as they are both masculine.

Personal space around avatars is significant in 3D environments, especially in immersive ones. Jingyi Zhang and Joshua Juvrud (2024) provide an example of an

incident they witnessed within the VRChat platform<sup>15</sup>. As they describe, while a Full-Body Tracked (FBT) user was dancing, a PC user came close and started jumping<sup>16</sup>. After being ignored, the PC user walked forward and got so close to the point of almost touching. The user, who was previously dancing, stepped back (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, pp. 5-6). The researchers found that “this observation highlights the nuances of social interactions and personal boundaries within VRChat” (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 6). Another exciting finding emerged from their research. Zhang and Juvrud observed that “Asian female users tended to conceal their gender and reduce their movements to avoid drawing attention to themselves as women” (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 8) in order to avoid abusive and harassing behaviors. As reported, within virtual worlds, users who publicly identify themselves as feminine often face harassment (Flanagan, 2000, pp. 75-76; Woods, 2021, p. 3). Nevertheless, this is not limited to how they identify in the actual world. The fact that their avatar is feminine is often a reason to receive abusive behaviors.

That is the case of Gwynn, who is a feminine avatar controlled by an actual world man. Gwynn was harassed in Second Life by another user who invaded her privacy. More specifically, Gwynn, who had found a private spot in which to get changed on a beach, was being stalked by the other player who was hovering 200m above her and spying on her. The incident was brought to her attention by a friend who caught her stalker in the act and sent her the following screenshot (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 167).

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<sup>15</sup> VRChat is an immersive social VR platform which contains many worlds based mostly on user-generated content.

<sup>16</sup> Note: In some virtual worlds it is possible to enter immersive VR environments both via FBT technology and via non-immersive technology such as a PC.



**Figure 14:** Screenshot of the player floating over Gwynn and spying on her in Second Life. Original caption: “Pwned. Floating voyeur caught in the act” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 168).

Unfortunately, that was not the only incident of harassment that Gwynn had to face in Second Life. At a time when she was working in the virtual office of a Brazilian company, Gwynn was teleported, without notice or her consent, to the location of the managing director of the company, with whom she had very little contact before. She was shocked to find herself sharing a bubble bath with him, who was minimally clothed, and immediately left. As the writers describe, Gwynn was “outraged by the all-too often blurring of boundaries commonly experienced in the physical world, and by women in professional contexts characterized by power differentials” (Francino & Guiller, 2011,

p. 171). The user apologized but repeated the behavior once again when he teleported her to “his private island, stark naked and with his newly-acquired genitals on display” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 172).

Gwynn’s experience online is not an exception, as many researchers not only record incidents of harassment happening to others but also experience them themselves. Nardi recalls an incident that happened in WoW while she was conducting her research. After a raid, the raid leader (an actual world man) asked in voice chat if there were any “real life females present apart from the one he knew” (Nardi, 2010, p. 154). After the researcher confirmed that she was, in fact, a woman, the leader proceeded to ask and pressure her for naked pictures of herself. The group of people who were present at that moment and witnessed the scene did not react (Nardi, 2010, p. 155). Reflecting on the incident, Nardi interpreted it as a “test” and a way of establishing male superiority; she was “put in her place.” As she commented: “females were implicitly asked to agree to the condition that they were participating in an activity in which males were the dominant gender. The other woman in the raid [...] had been accepted as a member of the late-night group. I was being tested and put on notice that the guys were in charge” (Nardi, 2010, p. 155).

Another example of such an incident comes from the experience of an adult woman who entered immersive social VR chat rooms with a profile listed as a thirteen-year-old girl in the context of the documentary series *Dispatches*. As she described in an article published in *The Guardian*, within the first ten minutes of her arrival, she experienced sexual harassment, racist comments, and rape jokes aimed at her. Additionally, she wrote: “I went into chat rooms and people were berating me, actually screaming at me. At one point, seven users surrounded me and tried to force me to

remove my safety shield<sup>17</sup> so they could do things to my body. I tried to run away, but they backed me up against a wall, trying to grab at me, making sexual comments” (Bokinni, 2022). She also commented that while she knows it was “not real” it was very intimidating due to the immersiveness of VR.

These behaviors would be unacceptable or at least prohibited in actual world settings like in a workplace and school, for example, where male dominance, especially in verbal expressions, becomes more hidden and coded (Nardi, 2010, p. 155). However, in virtual worlds (especially in competitive game-based worlds), dominance is “embraced, exaggerated, and given free expression in coarse masculine language” (Nardi, 2010, p. 156; see also Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 160), perhaps due to anonymity and lack of moderation from the platforms’ developers. While some users have made attempts to protect themselves and create “safe spaces” for them (like “women-only groups and spaces”), the idea of “online safe spaces” has been critiqued as “overused and undertheorized” (Clark-Parsons, 2017, as cited in Woods, 2021, p. 3).

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<sup>17</sup> In VR, a “safety shield” typically refers to sets of tools designed to protect users from potential harm or unwanted interactions. Depending on the settings the user chooses, the “safety shield” can mute a user’s microphone, hide avatars, disable custom animations, and so on.



# Chapter 6: Alternative performances - Subversion, Disruption and Empowerment

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## 6.1 GENDER SWAPPING

Gender swapping in virtual worlds is the act of presenting and performing a gendered identity different from the one a user typically embodies in the actual world. After all, there is no rule stating that users should enter with their “offline gender”, and so, they are able to have “plural, indeterminate, or non-gendered identities” (Huh & Williams, 2010, p. 161). The reasons for gender swapping vary: it might result from a need for self-expression, experimentation, role-playing, or others. As a practice, it often includes choosing a fitting username and modifying an avatar’s appearance. It is also common to change someone’s voice to achieve the desired effect. One communicative medium of virtual worlds, which offers rich material for analysis, is verbal communication through voice chat, an option given in some virtual worlds, especially immersive ones. Not only the content of dialogues that take place but also, as Zhand and Juvrud (2024) note, vocal cues can be used as signifiers which participants use, along with appearance and body language (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 9), to make assumptions about other’s gendered identities or to perform their own (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 2). Some participants use voice changers or undergo voice training in order to perform their gender identity in a desired way (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 9), verbally experimenting with “tone, pitch and cadence” (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 2).

All of the women who took part in Eklund’s (2011) study felt a need to choose a feminine avatar, while their choice of race and class was also limited by “traditional

gender patterns” (Eklund, 2011, p. 330). This is a frequent pattern in virtual worlds. While women do have the option to swap genders in virtual worlds, they tend to do so less, and so, gender swapping is more frequently observed in men who create feminine embodiments, especially in game-based virtual worlds, a phenomenon that, as it has been suggested, results from the normalization and aestheticization of men playing as feminine characters (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008, as cited in Eklund, 2011, p. 328), thus, appearing to hold strong links with male dominance and control over feminine bodies. “Quite simply, in a third-person perspective, it is claimed that some males would rather look at a female body than a male one” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 154). When interviewed about the reasons for this, men who engage in this practice answered with phrases like “Why not?”, “If I have to look at someone’s ass for three hours, it’s going to be a girl’s” (Nardi, 2010, p. 159), and “I like something nice to look at while I’m sitting there for eight hours with my eyes bleeding—and dwarves don’t do it for me” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 142). As Bonnie Nardi suggests, this choice of embodiment, which is often oversexualized, serves as “eye candy,” a “female fantasy character” upon which not only the user but also other participants can gaze (Nardi, 2010, p. 158).

“Self-stereotyping and self-fulfilling prophecies occur online whereby users act towards the stereotyped expectations regarding gender appropriate behavior” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 160). Both consciously and unconsciously, gender swapping is generally done within these stereotypic contexts (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 159). Men who adopt feminine embodiments in virtual worlds often do so by reproducing gender norms and traditional roles of femininity (Eklund, 2011, pp. 327-328). Ferdinand Francino and Jane Guiller (2011) provide us with such an example. One of the two writers, Ferdinand Francino, who identifies as a heterosexual man in the actual world, entered various virtual worlds with his internet persona, Gwynn, who is a

feminine avatar. Gwynn found herself on an occasion where another user, also an actual world man, controlling a masculine avatar, presented her with a ring that she then accepted. As the writers explained, Gwynn “played out the gendered role and conformed to stereotypical notions of what was expected of her as a female and displayed behaviors that are judged to be feminine, she accepted the ring and enjoyed feeling desired and protected by a stronger male” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 156). The user behind Gwynn explained that “he was not consciously aware of altering his behavior initially to present as female” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 159).

Encounters of such kind are a common theme in many game-based virtual worlds that are focused on action and combat. They highlight the performative nature of gender norms and stereotypes and show that they depend a lot on the avatar’s gender rather than the user’s actual world gender. Normative sexuality, therefore, seems to “motivate transgressive gendering.” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 142). This is also demonstrated in Searle Huh’s and Dmitri Williams’s work (2010), where users who identify as actual-world homosexual men gender-swap as heterosexual women (Huh & Williams, 2010, p. 170). This could be a way of avoiding harassment and attacks, as “homophobia is far from unknown online” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 165) and users can become the recipients of harassing behavior if their gender swapping is discovered by others who might perceive it as deceptive (Huh & Williams, 2010, p. 165) or as “exhibiting an inauthentic self in a virtual context that expects authenticity” (Boellstorff, 2008, pp. 184-185).

Even if they are already aware of a person’s gender-swapping online, people might still feel uncomfortable. For example, Ulrike Schultze and Wanda Orlikowski (2010) describe an incident in a corporate virtual world hosted by ProtoSphere, where one user decided to swap his gender and enter the world with a different embodiment than the one he went by in the actual world. His colleagues obliged him to swap his

gender again so that it would match his actual world embodiment because they felt “not comfortable with his attempted enactment of a differently gendered identity, and found it disruptive to team dynamics” (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, p. 817). As the researchers note, the fact that “identities in this corporate world were not anonymous may have contributed to this team’s insistence that participants perform their identities in familiar and consistent ways” (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, p. 817).

While gender swapping does have possible ethical implications (Francino & Guiller, 2011), what some might see as deceptive could actually be what someone sees as the realization of their “true self” (Childs, 2011, p. 24). In relation to the concept of the “true self”, Penelope Papailias and Petros Petridis comment that “if we look at the early uses of the word [avatar] in online environments, such as the early MMORPG Habitat (1986), the avatar seems to function more as a way of ‘revealing’ your (true) self in the online environment through digital incarnation” (Παπαηλία & Πετρίδης, 2015, p. 111)<sup>18</sup>. The notion of the “true self” often describes the expression of a self “from within”. Through this concept, Mark Childs offers an additional reading to the idealized embodiment of avatars, as, he claims, it might be an expression of users’ “body identities” and how they “truly” see themselves (Childs, 2011, p. 21). Additionally, Tom Boellstorff notes that “our critical impulse should not foreclose examining how such ostensibly normative embodiments may have different meanings and consequences online – not least because, for instance, the male avatar with bulging biceps may be female in the actual world” (Boellstorff, 2011, p. 507). This normative embodied identity might be one that the individual feels unable to actualize in their

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<sup>18</sup> My translation.

daily life in the actual world due to societal pressures, oftentimes that being the case with deviating gendered identities.

Some users describe virtual worlds as offering the space and materials for the actualization of a self that is “more them” than their corporeal body, which they feel is “corrupting the truth” about them. To them, the avatar is a means of overcoming actual world limitations and a way of presenting a “better” version of themselves, one that feels even “more right than their offline body” (Taylor, 2002, pp. 54-55). The fact that avatar embodiment is so much based on intentionality, according to Boellstorff, means that it is seen and understood by users as “revealing something deeply true about the choosing self” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 136) and even as “more authentic than actual-world embodiment” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 134). However, the notion of “the true self” has been subjected to criticism as it reproduces essentialist conceptions of identity and embodiment and consolidates the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010, p. 812). Users have referred to this kind of embodiment as being “right” for the purpose of “constructing, expressing and performing the identity they are seeking [emphasis added]” (Taylor, 2002, p. 52). The previous sentence linguistically indicates that the “true self” is the object of a search, thus proving it to be more of, we would say, a desired potential self rather than an expression of inherence. Perhaps the “true self” would be more useful as an emic than an analytical term.

## **6.2 CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS**

The understanding of embodiment as corporeality suggests that it is a “natural fact” that lies outside of our control and choices and that choices are associated only with culture (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 135). Additionally, “in the actual world, gender is

strongly conflated with embodiment, despite all of its disembodied modalities—linguistic, sartorial, relational” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 141). It is thought that virtual worlds offer a chance for reconfiguration of gender as static and naturalized. The fact that “offline” and “online” gender do not necessarily coincide gives the possibility of reimagining concepts such as femininity and masculinity, not only through forms of transgenering but also with the ascription of new meanings to embodiments and gender categories (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 141). “The boundaries delineated by cultural constructions of the body are both subverted and given free rein in virtual environments. With the body freed from the physical, it completely enters the realm of symbol” (Reid-Steere 1996, as cited in Webb, 2001, p. 565). Subversion and resistance to norms come through the conscious alternative performances of users.

Eklund’s (2011) study indicates that users can relate to their gender in virtual worlds either from a conformist or a subversive position. As her informants (all actual-world women) told her, when being in WoW, they either took advantage of a stereotypic feminine role to receive services from men, or they fought “for the right to be treated equally” (Eklund, 2011, p. 332) and to prove themselves as capable as men. Users often rotate between these two strategies, oftentimes employing them simultaneously (Eklund, 2011, p. 332). As the researcher explains, in WoW, chances of receiving help and services from men (the majority of the participants) are higher if you control a feminine avatar. However, Eklund notes, “this only applies if the man helping you believes you are a woman offline. This strategy can only be understood in the light of heterosexual play. The strategy where female gamers can claim help from male gamers only makes sense in a context where heterosexual desire is displayed” (Eklund, 2011, p. 332). One of her informants told her that she (the informant) had gained respect from other women due to her ability to “use men.” Her actions were

being perceived as exploitative towards men, and this was a form of resistance (Eklund, 2011, p. 332).

Other participants in Eklund's study chose to perform their gender "in ways not normally open to those with female bodies" (Eklund, 2011, p. 329). They experimented with their identities and tried different "versions" of femininity by creating more dynamic and active feminine characters, which they thought of as strong and independent (Eklund, 2011, p. 329). Perhaps their "need for identification" with their characters, which was frequently expressed by the participants (Eklund, 2011, pp. 327-328), is linked to the empowering elements that these alternative performances hold. These subversive acts facilitated the investment of the feminine body and identity with new meanings, showing gender as "unstable and multiple" (Eklund, 2011, p. 333) and negotiating and reinventing themselves (Eklund, 2011, p. 338).

Despite acting within the margins of male/female binarism, other ways of destabilizing gender in virtual worlds consist of having non-binary avatars. For example, in Second Life and in other virtual worlds where users can create their own content, it is possible to take on an agender embodiment or one that does not have clear and specific gender characteristics. These can be intersex or androgynous figures, non-human avatars, inanimate objects, and so on (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 143; Childs, 2011, p. 20). By having such embodiments that do not conform to the imposed binaries, users challenge norms, subvert meaning, and "demonstrate the fluidity of gender expression in virtual environments" (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 10).

From experimenting with "extremes" and adopting gender-specific behaviors in different contexts to having embodiments that do not indicate gender through appearance, engaging in such alternative performances is how users continuously reinvent gender. "The ease of creating and modifying virtual identities encourages

players to think of themselves as ‘fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible and ever in process’” (Turkle 1995, as cited in Childs, 2011, p. 21). As Butler states, “if the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (Butler, 2006/1990, pp. 198-199). Through these repetitive alternative practices new meaning is generated. As Zhang and Juvrud suggest, “this encourages a dialectical reconsideration of conventional notions of gender and identity” (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 10).

Some researchers (Boellstorff, 2008; Francino & Guiller, 2011; Zhang & Juvrud, 2024) suggest that these performances can affect users’ lives in the actual world as they allow them “to experience rather than merely observe” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 142). These experiences can have empowering and self-fulfilling effects and help users to “reflect upon and transform their actual-world gender” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 142) and sexual practices. For example, one user learned that she was trans after she started roleplaying in Second Life (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 138), and another user “learned that she was bisexual through engaging in sexual activities in the game Sociolotron” (Whitty et al., 2010, as cited in Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 169). Drawing from their study in VRChat, Zhang and Juvrud suggest that through these virtual experiences, users come to question social norms in real life (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024, p. 10). For example, Ferdinand Francino, who was the user behind Gwynn, stated that “the gendered interactions that he experienced inworld have had a significant impact on his physical identity and understanding of gender roles” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 168) and that his yearlong experience from a perspective of a woman in virtual worlds helped him



acquire empathy and made him, in his words, “a better man” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 168).

## Chapter 7: Discussion

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This thesis explored various studies examining gendered themes in virtual worlds, in all of which avatars have been central. What has been made clear is that virtual embodiment holds not just an important but a necessary place in the realization of virtual worlds. Sociality, subjectivity, and identity all rely on the virtual body. Through its stylization, an ongoing and never-ending process, avatars are ascribed meaning within the gender binary. According to Judith Butler, “discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture” (Butler, 1988, p. 522). By analogy, we could, perhaps, assume that to avatars, which are not humans in the literal sense, gendered appearance, often exaggerated, is what attributes “humanness” to them. This alone emphasizes the performative nature of gender. Through its repetitive performative acts, the avatar body, like the actual, is induced to become “a cultural sign” (Butler, 1988, p. 522).

Virtual experiences are not limited to virtual planes but have immediate and severe effects on the actual lives of users, affecting them in various ways. Experiencing harassing behavior can be potentially damaging and traumatizing for vulnerable individuals, especially for unsupervised children. In the example given at the end of chapter 5, a supposedly underage girl had access to chatrooms where not only did she receive harassing behavior but witnessed users simulate sexual acts (some of which were highly taboo-breaking<sup>19</sup>) and uttered extreme hate speech. As the writer of the

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<sup>19</sup> Some parts of the article as well as other parts of the literature, such as descriptions of symbolic pedophilic acts, have been excluded due to their potentially distressing content. This omission does not compromise the overall completeness or analytical rigor of the study as they appear only as brief references in my material and are not analyzed by the original authors.

article said: “At one point I heard someone say ‘I like little girls from the age of nine to 12: that’s just my thing’” (Bokinni, 2022). Even though she deemed this experience as “not real” she kept emphasizing how upsetting it was for her. As Marry Flanagan notes, “in cyberspace and in real space [...] actions taking place in networks have very real impacts on human beings (Flanagan, 2000, p. 75). Additionally, as in the case of Gwynn, these experiences gave the man behind her “an understanding of what it is like to be a victim of unwanted attention and harassment, and an experience of what it can be like to be female in a male-dominated environment in which sexual harassment of female characters is not an unusual occurrence” (Francino & Guiller, 2011, p. 169).

It should not make an impression that virtual worlds reproduce and are governed by power relations. As said before, they are not entirely different planes of existence with their own rules or realized utopias. “We are not magically freed from our bodies when we go online, neither do we disregard the frameworks of group norms” (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 178). Rather, aspects of sociality, part of which are performances, are transferred to virtual spaces. Ideologies, gender norms, hierarchical gender relations, stereotypes, and beauty standards are reproduced and expressed, sometimes even more intensely. Hence, most avatars in virtual worlds are idealized. Thus, the body and its appearance become central in virtual worlds. As Shaowen Bardzell and Jeffrey Bardzell (2008) note, avatars, in many ways, might be considered “poor as literal representations of users, but they are rich as performed expressions of how users perceive themselves and/or desire to be perceived” (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008, p. 12). But appearance is not just an image of representation. It is linked to sociality and affects human action. People in virtual worlds perform themselves and treat others according to appearance (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 130). Appearance, as a form of a “public embodiment,” holds the potential to both “embrace and resist various systems of

meaning embedded in different levels of social group cultures” (Martey & Consalvo, 2011, p. 178).

Hence, we cannot define these environments as a priori oppressive or as a priori liberating. Like in the actual world, in virtual environments, oppression and resistance co-exist and are in continuous conflict. In this sense, virtual worlds come to be both grounds for the reproduction of power and, at the same time, places of its questioning. Butler comments that gender performative acts “either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way” (Butler, 1988, pp. 527-528). As Christopher Breu notes, “the positioning of identity between fixity and fluidity, subjective construction and social determination, challenges both liberal conceptions of identity as thoroughly fluid and individually produced and right-wing conceptions of it as hard-wired and biological” (Christopher Breu, 2016, p. 66). While reproducing heteronormative standards and patriarchal stereotypes, virtual worlds and the anonymity some of them offer have also been spaces where experimentation has taken place and gender stereotypes have been challenged (Fron et al., 2007, p. 18) By engaging in alternative performances, some users consciously challenge and subvert norms which can have potentially benefiting effects in the actual world.

To understand gender and gender relations in these environments, we need not only to redefine and critically reexamine our cultural categories of gender, body, and space but also to explore new and emerging relationships between them. As Mary Flanagan states: “If we can reveal the processes by which gender is produced -partly through the concept of performativity and partly through the technological apparatus used to create the work and its embedded ideologies- then we may also be able to reveal the processes through which ideas about space and their tie to gender are produced” (Flanagan, 2000, p. 81). Analogously, “to understand the construction of virtual bodies

and space, it is necessary to examine connections between gender and these sites of manifestation, especially the ways that gendered concepts are embedded in the construction of online worlds” (Flanagan, 2000, p. 75). Thus, we need to understand the dialectical relationship between body and space.

Researchers need to reinstate the study of embodiment and open the black box, which is the body (Lock, 1993, p. 133). Especially the study of the virtual body, which is disconnected from biologized discourse, can be “a valuable starting point for rethinking the nature of culture and our existential situation as cultural beings” (Csordas 1994, as cited in Boellstorff, 2011, p. 509). Just like in the 70s and particularly the 80s, where the “New Reproductive Technologies” (NRTs) shook up Western cultural notions of kinship (see Strathern, 1992; Franklin & Ragoné, 1998; Carsten, 2004), the avatar could challenge our presupposed positions on gender and embodiment and help us in overcoming divisions and binaries.



# Epilogue

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Throughout history, artifacts (some of which, perhaps, are more obvious and direct in their effects) have contributed to rapid social shifts, shaping social action, the social imaginary, the economy, and the political scene in a variety of ways (Bijker, 2006, p. 681). Being human-made and situated within particular socio-cultural contexts, they carry and reproduce ideology, as demonstrated by numerous thinkers (Winner, 1980; Hect, 1994; Raman, 2013; Noble, 2018). “New technologies do not appear from nowhere as a mystical spark of inspiration from the mind of one individual. Nor are they inevitably accepted for their self-evident benefits. A technology emerges through a process involving broader cultural, linguistic, institutional and technological contexts” (Chesher, 1994, p. 1). Hence, as virtual worlds, both immersive and non-immersive, become more popular, the need to study them becomes more significant. Studying the virtual can give great insight into how the actual works and vice versa.

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