

My avatar, my self: Virtual harm and attachment*

Jessica Wolfendale

Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia
E-mail: jwo@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract. Multi-user online environments involve millions of participants world-wide. In these online communities participants can use their online personas – avatars – to chat, fight, make friends, have sex, kill monsters and even get married. Unfortunately participants can also use their avatars to stalk, kill, sexually assault, steal from and torture each other. Despite attempts to minimise the likelihood of interpersonal virtual harm, programmers cannot remove all possibility of online deviant behaviour.

Participants are often greatly distressed when their avatars are harmed by other participants' malicious actions, yet there is a tendency in the literature on this topic to dismiss such distress as evidence of too great an involvement in and identification with the online character. In this paper I argue that this dismissal of virtual harm is based on a set of false assumptions about the nature of avatar attachment and its relation to genuine moral harm. I argue that we cannot dismiss avatar attachment as morally insignificant without being forced to also dismiss other, more acceptable, forms of attachment such as attachment to possessions, people and cultural objects and communities. Arguments against according moral significance to virtual harm fail because they do not reflect participants' and programmers' experiences and expectations of virtual communities and they have the unintended consequence of failing to grant significance to attachments that we take for granted, morally speaking. Avatar attachment is expressive of identity and self-conception and should therefore be accorded the moral significance we give to real-life attachments that play a similar role.

Key words: virtual reality, avatars, attachment, virtual harm, ethics in virtual reality

Multi-user online environments involve millions of participants world-wide. At any given time the concurrent online population of online games is greater than the population of Singapore.¹ In these online communities participants can use their online personas – avatars – to chat, fight, make friends, have sex, kill monsters and even get married.² Unfortunately participants can also use their avatars to stalk, kill, sexu-

ally assault, steal from and torture each other.³ Despite attempts to minimise the possibility of interpersonal virtual harm, programmers cannot remove all possibility of online deviant behaviour. As Dan Hunter and F. Gregory Lastowka put it, "If avatars find it amusing to make the live of others miserable, they will find ways to do so."⁴

What is the moral status of this form of interpersonal harm? How should we respond to the victims? Despite the fact that virtual harm can cause great distress to participants whose avatars are harmed by other participants' malicious actions, there is a tendency in the literature on this topic to dismiss such distress as evidence of, as one writer put it, too much "psychological investment" on the part of participants.⁵

* A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Cyberspace 2005 Conference at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

¹ Leo Sang-Min Whang, Ph.D. and Geunyoung Chang Ph.D. Lifestyles of Virtual World Residents: Living in The On-line Game "lineage". *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7(5): 592–600, 2004, p. 593.

² The term 'avatar' refers to the graphical representation that participants adopt in the virtual world. The term derives from Hinduism and refers to the descent of a deity to the earth (Dan Hunter and F. Gregory Lastowka. To Kill An Avatar. *Legal Affairs*, July–August 2003, accessed 12 March 2005 at <http://www.legalaffairs.org/issues/July–August-2003/feature_hunter_julaug03.html>). In *Ultima Online* male and female characters can get married. (Castulus Kolo and Timo Baur. Living a Virtual Life: Social Dynamics of Online Gaming. *Game Studies*, 4(1), 2004, accessed 17 March 2005 at <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/kolo/>>).

³ I am limiting the discussion in the paper to harm committed by one participant(s) against another. I will not be discussing the issue of harm against purely computer generated characters.

⁴ Hunter and Lastowka.

⁵ J.R. Suler and W. Phillips. The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behaviour in Online Communities and Strategies for Managing it. Accessed 18 April 2005 at <<http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psyber/badboys.html>>.

In this paper I argue that this dismissal of virtual harm is based on a set of false assumptions about the nature of avatar attachment and its relation to genuine moral harm. I argue that we cannot dismiss avatar attachment as morally insignificant without being forced to also dismiss other, far more acceptable, forms of attachment such as attachment to possessions, people, cultural objects and communities. Arguments against according moral significance to virtual harm fail because they do not reflect participants' and programmers' experiences and expectations of virtual communities and they have the unintended consequence of failing to grant significance to attachments that we take for granted, morally speaking. Avatar attachment is expressive of identity and self-conception and should therefore be accorded the moral significance we give to real-life attachments that play a similar role.

Taking virtual harm seriously

Should we even consider this topic worthy of discussion? How serious is virtual harm? Anecdotal evidence indicates both that virtual harm is common and that victims of virtual harm can be extremely upset by the experience – sometimes more upset than they themselves expected. The victims of the infamous 1992 LambdaMOO rape case, for example, were surprised at the strength of their own distress.⁶ In the virtual rape, the controller of a character called Mr. Bungle exploited a feature of the LambdaMOO text-based online world to describe the victims' online characters (legba and Starsinger) performing brutal and sexually explicit acts – descriptions which everyone who was logged in at the time could read.⁷ After the event, the woman who controlled the character legba told a reporter that as she wrote about the experience on the LambdaMOO site, “posttraumatic tears were streaming down her face.” She was a long-time participant in online communities and a PhD student, yet she was “baffled and overwhelmed by the force of her reaction.”⁸

A study of players of the online game “Lineage” confirmed that virtual harm can have significant emotional impact on victims. The study found that being killed in the online world by a player killer “sometimes causes severe emotional distress if the

player got involved in the game world.”⁹ In a survey of other online role-playing games, an EverQuest player describes her distress at being verbally harassed by other players:

... After a lot of verbal abuse and my guild coming to back me up ... I found I was actually crying (RL) [real-life] I couldn't believe that I let them affect me in that way... that it was just a game. I then realized that day, that it isn't 'JUST' a game and I never let anyone talk to me that way again!!!¹⁰

Another EverQuest player talks about her response when her avatar was ignored by other players in the game:

Yet again, I was ignored ... I told all goodnight and jogged back to a safe zone. I was crying too hard to play. My own guild didn't want me.

It is clear that being affected by online harm is not a mark of obsessive or abnormal behaviour, but is a common experience for many participants who are emotionally engaged in the online world. Such emotional engagement enables participants to derive a great deal of pleasure from participating in the online community but it means that they are vulnerable to being affected by virtual harm.

But the extent and impact of virtual harm does not provide a *prima facie* reason to take virtual harm seriously. What is the moral significance of virtual harm?

Character-controller identification and virtual harm

In his discussion of the LambdaMOO rape case, Thomas Powers argues that the status of that rape as a real moral wrong can be traced to what he calls “controller-character identification.”¹¹ Drawing on speech-act theory Powers argues that online interactions in text-based communities such as LambdaMOO are meaningful speech acts that constitute real-world actions because they are expressive of the agent's intentions and actions.¹² Text-based worlds rely on performative utterances – communications that do not express a truth-value but have illocutionary force (they are intentional) and perlocutionary force (they have a social effect and significance).¹³ As Powers writes:

⁹ Whang and Chang, p. 596.

¹⁰ The Daedalus Project. The Psychology of MMORPGS. Accessed 9 March 2006 at <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000514.php>

¹¹ Thomas M. Powers. Real Wrongs in Virtual Communities. *Ethics and Information Technology* 5(4): 191–198, 2003, p. 196.

¹² Powers, 193.

¹³ Ibid.

⁶ For a discussion of this case, see Julian Dibbell. A Rape in Cyberspace or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database Into a Society. *Village Voice*, 38(51): 1993, accessed 13 March 2005 at <<http://www.english.vt.edu/~IDLE/assign/bungle/bungle.html>> .

⁷ See Dibbell's article for a full description of the event.

⁸ Dibbell.

The agents of the virtual community act in this performative way much as people do in any social realm when, by means of language, they flirt, cajole, honor, promise, chastise, and so on.¹⁴

These speech-acts are partly constitutive of the online text-based community and take place in the context of what Powers calls “legitimate moral expectations” and traditions about good and bad online behaviour.¹⁵ The social context in which online communications occur defines the meaning and effect of such communications, and delineates morally appropriate from morally inappropriate (or downright harmful) online behaviour. Furthermore, because online characters are “conduits of the meanings and illocutionary force of the controller’s acts”,¹⁶ controllers engage in what Powers calls “reflexive performative” speech acts by which they simultaneously aim to affect their character’s appearance and performance in the online community and also act on themselves by experimenting with different representations.¹⁷ This reflexivity closely connects the controller and her character and results in a strong identification between controller and character. This identification means that harm done to the character is also harm to the controller, and this is why the harm done the characters legba and Starsinger in the LambdaMOO site constituted real harm to the controllers of those characters, and constituted a genuine moral wrong.¹⁸

However, Powers does not think that virtual harm in 3D online role-playing games constitutes a genuine moral wrong. He argues that many online worlds permit and indeed encourage deviant and violent behaviour, and therefore such behaviour does not count as a genuine moral wrong because “it is a reasonable expectation, upon signing up to play the game, that your avatar at some point will be abused, violated, dismembered and exterminated.”¹⁹ He argues that such 3D online worlds are “Hobbesian” worlds where “Participation is a free choice and offense does not count as harm.”²⁰

It is of course true that many virtual worlds, particularly role-playing games such as EverQuest and Ultima Online, permit kinds of avatar violence. For many players, the possibility of such violence may well be part of these games’ appeal. Virtual commu-

nities are exciting and liberating precisely because they give participants freedom to explore new ways of interacting with others and new ways of presenting oneself.²¹ But this freedom does not mean that “anything goes” in these worlds or that there are no moral distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable avatar behaviour. Participants and designers of online communities make clear distinctions between acceptable kinds of violence (killing other avatars in war, for example) and unacceptable (killing other avatars for the sheer fun of it). The players of the online game Lineage, for instance, happily accept player-on-player killing in certain contexts such as during a castle siege. This form of player killing is known as PvP (player versus player) and is quite different from illegitimate player killing, known as PK, which occurs when a player or gang of players ambush and kill another player to steal their virtual goods.²² All virtual worlds make this distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of avatar violence and have ways of managing players who use their avatars to harass and kill other avatars.²³ It is therefore simply false to state, as Powers does, that 3D virtual worlds lack “moral relations” because they permit *some* kinds of deviant behaviour.²⁴ The presence of social sanctions within virtual worlds and the “perception of reciprocity” of good behaviour among players clearly demonstrate that moral relations are taken very seriously within virtual worlds. Like the text-based world of LambdaMOO, there is a strong set of shared expectations about behaviour.²⁵

Powers’ dismissal of the moral significance of virtual harm in 3D online worlds cannot make sense of players and programmers’ responses to inappropriate avatar violence. Nor can it explain the many and creative ways in which members of virtual worlds have dealt with avatar violence as a community. For example, players of Habitat created a virtual church to promote avatar nonviolence, and other virtual worlds have put up notice boards offering rewards for capturing player-killers and made some areas of the game world killing-free zones.²⁶

Unless one wants to claim that players and programmers are all mistaken in their belief that there are appropriate and inappropriate forms of avatar violence, it is clear that participants in 3D virtual communities have the same kinds of moral expecta-

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Powers, p. 195.

¹⁶ Powers, p. 196.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Powers, p. 197.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hunter and Lastowka.

²² Whang and Chang, p. 596.

²³ See Suler and Phillips.

²⁴ Powers, p. 198.

²⁵ M. Cranford. The Social Trajectory of Virtual Reality: Substantive Ethics in a World Without Constraints. *Technology in Society* 18(1): 79–92, 1996, p. 89.

²⁶ Hunter and Lastowka.

tions of other players that characterised the world of LambdaMOO.

Furthermore, as Powers himself points out, it is the relationship between the controller and her character mediated by an environment of shared expectations that makes virtual harm a genuine moral wrong. Virtual harms constitute real moral harms against real people. What is different in virtual harm is not the nature of the harm but *how* the harm is inflicted, which is through participants' attachment to and identification with their online characters. It is the nature of the relationship between the avatar and the controller that makes virtual harm possible, yet Powers does not explore the moral significance of this relationship in 3D online worlds.

Avatar attachment in 3D worlds

In 3D online communities, avatars are the graphical representations of the participants. Participants use their avatars to communicate with other players through actions and speech. It is through the avatar that the player communicates with other players and, as Powers notes, the inclusion of a graphical element greatly increases the potential range of interactions.²⁷ The avatar is not just an object manipulated by the participant; it is a representation of identity. As T.L. Taylor points out, avatars are

... the material out of which relationships and interactions are embodied: much as in offline life with its corporeal bodies, digital bodies are used in a variety of ways – to greet, to play, to signal group affiliation, to convey opinions or feelings, and to create closeness.²⁸

The combination of a graphical representation and the use of text to interact with others in the online community creates a powerful sense of what psychologists call “presence”²⁹ – the sense of being physically immersed in an environment, a sense that results in avatar behaviour that mimics the ways bodies are used in offline life. For example, participants often report a strong sense of personal space and “body boundaries” within the virtual community. Just as we move away if someone comes too close to us, so players will move their avatars away if someone else's avatar invades their ‘personal’ space. Similarly, players move their avatars very

close to other avatars if they wish to be aggressive and threatening.³⁰ Physical proximity between avatars can be used to signal intimacy and friendship, just as bodily proximity does in offline life.³¹

Avatars are therefore far more than mere online objects manipulated by a user. They are the embodied conception of the participant's self through which she communicates with others in the community. Of course, players often choose avatars with physical, emotional and personality traits that are very different from their actual traits, but avatars are still experienced as being expressive of the participant's personal identity. Studies of participants in the online community The Dreamscape found that the initial stage of choosing an avatar was closely linked to how well the avatar reflected a sense of the user's identity: “... the act of creating an avatar is to a large extent focussed on getting to the “that's me” stage”.³² For some participants their avatar was felt to be a truer reflection of their identity than their real life personas; “people often say that it was through their avatar that they found a “better” version of themselves, one that felt even more right than their offline body.”³³ This strong connection between the self and the avatar is evident in the language that participants use to describe interactions in virtual worlds. The words of the EverQuest players quoted in Section 1 show that they make no distinction between harm caused to their avatar and harm caused to them: “*I* was ignored”; “*I* never let anyone talk to *me* like that again.” This identification with the avatar means that harm to avatar is felt as harm to the individual.

It is clear from this analysis of avatar attachment that the character–controller identification discussed by Powers in relation to text-based worlds is, if anything, stronger in 3D worlds because of the inclusion of a quasi-physical presence. It is this combination of presence, identity and communication that explains both why avatar attachment is common and why harm to avatars can cause great distress.³⁴ Powers is therefore mistaken in his claim that harm to characters in online role-playing games

³⁰ Taylor, pp. 42–43.

³¹ Taylor, p. 43.

³² Taylor, p. 52.

³³ Taylor, p. 55.

³⁴ It is difficult to think of a clear off-line analogy of this kind of attachment. The unique nature of online graphical interactions means that this form of attachment is in some ways unique – there are no other arenas of human interaction whereby such interaction is performed by creative representations of one's self. Certainly many forms of off-line attachments – to objects, ideas, groups, and people – are linked strongly to self-concept and self-identity, but none of these involve attachment to a self-created identity that is a conduit for interaction.

²⁷ Powers, p. 197.

²⁸ T.L. Taylor. Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds. In Ralph Schroeder, editor, *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, pp. 40–62, p. 41, Springer-Verlag, London, 2002.

²⁹ Taylor discusses presence on pages 41–43.

does not constitute genuine moral harm, for both the shared expectations about behaviour and the character-controller identification that characterised LambdaMOO are present in 3D virtual worlds.

However explaining the nature of avatar attachment does not tell us what attitude we should adopt towards it. Even if virtual harm can constitute a genuine moral harm, we might think that this is a reason to discourage avatar attachment. As Chuck Huff, Deborah Johnson and Keith Miller point out: “The more invested the controller, the more damaging virtual violence can be.”³⁵ Perhaps participants should be encouraged to reduce their identification with and attachment to their avatars. This is the view taken by several writers in this area. For example R. Suler and W. Phillips argue that victims of online harms should consider just “stepping back” psychologically from their investment in their online personas: “Perhaps the best defence against snerts [troublesome players] is to unravel the psychological investment a bit.”³⁶ Thomas Powers quotes this line approvingly in relation to 3D online worlds and notes that “At least one option remains open to all online participants: opt out.”³⁷

This attitude is based on the unstated premise that avatar attachment – the source of the moral harm of virtual violence – is not a morally significant form of attachment. But why is this? After all, we do not tell someone whose house has been robbed that they should just “unravel their psychological investment” in their possessions. What is different about avatar attachment? Is avatar attachment analogous to other forms of attachment – attachment to objects, people, groups, ideas? To answer this question, we need a clearer understanding of what kinds of attachment are morally significant.

Morally significant forms of attachment

A fully developed theory of significant attachments is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will outline some intuitive grounds for distinguishing commonly accepted forms of attachments from those considered unwise or unhealthy.

In the offline world there are numerous forms of attachment that are considered to be morally legitimate. Moderate attachment to material pos-

sessions is quite acceptable and even taken for granted – we just *assume* that people will be upset if their car or stereo or jewellery is stolen and we would be surprised if they were not upset. We certainly do not dismiss someone’s distress at being robbed as a sign that they have too much “psychological investment” in their possessions, even though their distress would be far less if they were not so attached. Attachment to other people is taken even more seriously. Failure to be appropriately attached to others is considered a moral (and indeed a psychological) failing. Attachment to ideals (for example, the pursuit of justice), to national and cultural identity and to religious identity is similarly accepted as morally significant in moderate degrees and in some cases is seen as morally virtuous. A deeply patriotic person will be greatly upset by insults to their country and by actions such as flag-burning. While we might disagree with the grounds for their attachment, we would still take their distress seriously.

There are important differences in the nature of these morally acceptable attachments, but in each of these examples attachment plays an important role in an individual’s personal narrative, psychological well-being and self-conception. We become attached to possessions not just because of their usefulness or aesthetic value but because they can represent aspects of ourselves and have important personal significance. We are more likely to be sympathetic to someone who has lost a treasured family heirloom than to someone whose vast collection of shoes has been stolen, and we are more likely to consider the thief to be a morally bad person because of the harm their actions have caused to the victim’s attachment. Similarly, attachment to a group identity (ethnic, political, religious) is a central part of identity formation, and is indeed the basis for the political theory of communitarianism. Attachment to other people is far more complex but is, at the very least, central to basic human flourishing and social and psychological well-being. Such attachment also plays a role in identity formation – we often define who we are partly through our relationships with others, as parents, children, siblings, friends and lovers.

Community expectations also delineate certain kinds of morally legitimate attachments, particularly religious and cultural attachments. This is less obvious in multi-cultural societies, but cultures with strong religious unity are more likely to disregard competing religious attachments. For example, a deeply Christian community would be unlikely to accord much moral weight to someone’s deep attachment to the religion of Ancient Egypt. However, we might well criticise them for that behaviour

³⁵ Chuck Huff, Deborah G. Johnson and Keith Miller. Virtual Harms and Real Responsibility. *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*, 22(2): 12–19, 2003, p. 17.

³⁶ Suler and Phillips.

³⁷ Powers, p. 197. This is rather inconsistent of Powers, because surely we could say the same to the victims of the LambdaMOO rape.

because it is possible to recognise the importance of such attachments even when we do not share them. Indeed, certain classes of acts that are commonly accepted to be genuine moral wrongs only make sense in light of the importance we ascribe to these attachments. Attempts to erode indigenous cultures by, for example, forbidding the use of the indigenous language, are now considered great moral wrongs in part because they attack the connection between culture and identity.

What attachments don't we consider morally legitimate? An obvious class of morally insignificant attachments is attachments to imaginary objects. For example, I might have an imaginary friend Bob who is my constant companion. I might be very attached to Bob, and this attachment means that I am deeply upset if other people don't acknowledge him or worse yet, accidentally hurt him. There is no doubting the sincerity of my attachment to Bob, but it is very likely that other people would not accord that attachment much moral weight. My close friends and family may well try to avoid harming Bob because of the distress it would cause me, but they would not consider the act of sitting on Bob to be a great moral wrong. Instead, they would probably encourage me to recognise that Bob was imaginary to help me gradually let go of the attachment.

A second far more common example of attachment to imaginary objects is attachment to fictional characters. Suppose I became extremely attached to the character of Aragorn in the *Lord of the Rings* films, so much so that when Aragorn is threatened I feel extremely concerned. Because of my deep attachment to Aragorn, harm that befalls him greatly upsets me. Nor am I alone in my attachment, as the hordes of Aragorn fans attest. Yet despite the fact that my attachment is not unique and given Aragorn's charms, quite understandable, my friends would probably not be inclined to take my attachment to Aragorn seriously. Instead, they would probably encourage me to lessen my "psychological investment" in Aragorn so that I didn't get quite so emotionally involved in his adventures.

These kinds of attachments are usually considered not only morally insignificant but unhealthy. Attachment to imaginary objects can undermine a person's capacity to function normally in human society, can cause emotional distress and are also simply based on false beliefs about the existence of the object of attachment and about the relationship between the person and the object of attachment.

Does avatar attachment fulfil the requirements of morally significant forms of attachment, or is it a form of unhealthy attachment that we should discourage? At first glance we might be inclined to label

avatar attachment a form of attachment to imaginary objects. After all, avatars are not real objects. They are creative constructions for use in a fantasy environment, and as such they are (like imaginary friends and fictional characters) not appropriate objects of attachment. Avatar attachment might be both common and understandable, but participants in virtual worlds should be encouraged to lessen their psychological attachment to their avatars – to recognise that their avatars are not real.

This objection has superficial plausibility, but on closer examination neither imaginary friends nor imaginary characters are analogous with avatars.

Unlike an imaginary friend or fictional character, an avatar is the participant's persona in the virtual world. An avatar is far more than an imaginary object; it is a form of self-expression and online identity. Unlike attachment to an external imaginary object, therefore, attachment to an avatar is attachment to a self-chosen and self-created object; an object that you control, that you act through and that you use to interact with others. It is the object that represents you in the virtual world and it is therefore not imaginary at all, or not in the way that an imaginary friend or fictional character is imaginary.

Furthermore, avatar attachment occurs in the context of a community of participants – a whole virtual world – who have shared expectations about the use of avatars and who all use avatars to communicate with each other. An attachment to an avatar is not an event removed from the wider community but an attachment that only gains meaning within a community of shared values and expectations. As Giuseppe Riva points out, "Social context is a prerequisite of communication, 'a shared symbolic order in which action becomes meaningful, and so generates meaning.'"³⁸ Unlike other kinds of imaginary objects, avatars are used in worlds composed of a "shared symbolic order" and they gain their legitimacy at least partly from the social values and community expectations in which they occur.³⁹ As I pointed out earlier, shared community expectations is a feature of a certain class of offline morally significant attachments including religious and cultural

³⁸ Giuseppe Riva. The Sociocognitive Psychology of Computer-Mediated Communication: The Present and Future of Technology Based Interactions. *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 5(6): 581–598, 2002, p. 589, quoting G. Mantovani, *New Communication Environments: from Everyday to Virtual*. Taylor & Francis, London, 1996.

³⁹ Perhaps if it were commonplace for people to have imaginary friends and there were a set of shared norms for interacting with each others' imaginary friends, then my attachment to would have moral legitimacy and we would take harm to that attachment seriously.

attachments, attachments that only gain moral significance and acceptance in a community that shares those values. Because avatar attachment is expressive of self-identity and is a means of communication with others – communication that takes place in a setting of shared values and expectations – we cannot dismiss it as morally insignificant without being forced to dismiss as equally insignificant normally acceptable forms of attachment such as attachment to people, possessions, and communities.

However, even if avatar attachment is similar in morally relevant ways to more acceptable forms of attachment there might be straightforward consequentialist reasons to discourage attachment to avatars. Perhaps participants in online communities would simply be better off emotionally, socially and financially, if they were less attached to their avatars. Because avatar attachment requires heavy to moderate computer usage, such attachment could lead to social isolation and breakdown of close personal relationship as well as job losses and financial problems,⁴⁰ and could be linked to internet addiction. Furthermore, reducing avatar attachment would reduce the emotional impact of virtual harm.

The consequences of attachment

It is true that avatar attachment can cause distress when virtual harm occurs. It can also cause participants to spend long hours on the computer to the detriment of other parts of their lives. However, appealing to the negative consequences of attachment has two serious flaws.

First, an analysis of the empirical evidence does not support the claim that participation in online communities leads to social isolation, financial problems and other negative consequences. Studies have shown that, far from causing breakdowns in existing social relations, one of the main motivations for participating in online communities is the opportunity to combine existing relationships with the online world – many players play with their friends.⁴¹ One study found that “60% of female gamers and 16% of male gamers play with a romantic partner. 40% of female gamers and 35% of male gamers play with a family.”⁴²

A study of German players of Ultima Online found that many actively sought out social relations

with other players: “Most players (88%) not only connect to Ultima Online in order to play but also to stay simultaneously in contact with fellow players by a messaging system ...”⁴³ Two other studies (one on EverQuest and one on computer games in general) found that the motivation for gaming was often “the production of social networks and the circulation of social capital” and furthermore found that gaming tended to be “integrated into existing peer relationships” rather than promoting social isolation or damaging existing relationships.⁴⁴ These researchers found little change in players’ off-line relationships – 90% of players surveyed said that there was no change in their offline relationships once they started playing.⁴⁵

Empirical studies also found little evidence that avatar attachment or participation in online communities was linked to internet addiction. The majority of players would not fit the criteria of internet addiction. Attachment to an avatar is very far from being a prerequisite or even a defining feature of internet addiction, which is defined simply by the duration and frequency of online sessions – sessions that might involve internet shopping, emailing, chat rooms, or any number of different online activities. Such addiction is in fact quite rare – a study of Korean internet users found that only 3.47% of nearly 14,000 internet users met the criteria for addiction.⁴⁶ Addiction is not a by-product of playing online games. Instead, internet addicts (like other addicts) use the internet to mask existing problems. There is therefore little evidence supporting the contention that virtual attachment is inherently unhealthy or indicative of problematic internet addiction. Virtual attachment does not necessarily damage existing relationships nor promote social isolation. For many players, participating in online communities expands social networks and enhances existing social relationships. Indeed, for people who are isolated geographically from large social networks, online communities can provide much needed social contact.

Second, people participate in online communities because it gives them pleasure. Avatar attachment can cause distress if the avatar is harmed, but it can also be a source of pleasure; pleasure from interacting with others, from exploring new aspects of one’s self and new ways of behaving, and pleasure from achievement. Such pleasure requires a measure of

⁴³ Kolo and Baur.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Leo Sang-Min Whang, Ph.D., Sujin Lee, Ph.D., and Geunyoung Chang, M.A. Internet Over-Users’ Psychological Profiles: A Behaviour Sampling Analysis on Internet Addiction. *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 6(2): 143–150, 2003, p. 146.

⁴⁰ Whang, Lee and Chang, p. 143.

⁴¹ Kolo and Baur.

⁴² The Daedalus Project. The Psychology of MMORPGS. <http://www.nickye.com/daedalus/archives/000514.php>

attachment to and identification with one's avatar. A study of players of the online game Lineage found that players who were community-oriented and psychologically involved with the game had the highest sense of belonging, trust and loyalty within the game world.⁴⁷ Encouraging detachment would therefore undermine some of the reasons for participating in online communities in the first place.

Furthermore the detached attitude is the same kind of attitude that virtual criminals – player-killers, harassers and virtual torturers – tend to have toward other participants. Mr. Bungle, the virtual rapist in the LambdaMOO case, explained his actions by claiming that he had engaged in a “psychological device that is called thought-polarisation ... it was purely a sequence of events with no consequence on my RL [real life] existence.”⁴⁸ Similarly the Lineage study found that players (called “off-real world players”) who “believed that it is all right to harm others in the game world, whereas they do not in the real world” were far more likely to engage in anti-social and harmful online behaviour than players who were more involved in the social aspects of the game and who took the effects of their online behaviour more seriously.⁴⁹ The off-real world players, comprising about 26% of players studied, took a relativist view about online behaviour and morality and so did not see other players as morally significant.⁵⁰ Arguably, avatar attachment enables a greater awareness of and empathy with other participants as real people who can be hurt by virtual harm.

Perhaps, though, the fact that virtual detachment may undermine some participants' motivation for joining an online community and might increase the number of players who are anti-social in the online world may be no bad thing. After all, the more people who take the detached attitude, the fewer people who will be upset if their avatars are attacked. And if some players lose their motivation for playing, that is no bad thing either – they will be more likely to engage in real-world activities and relationships instead. Again there will be fewer players who are distressed by virtual harm. Attachment to an avatar might increase the pleasure of participating in an online community, but that is not a reason to consider such attachment morally significant.

The problem with this argument – and the more general problem with appealing to the consequences of attachment – is that it cannot be limited only to attachment to avatars. It will apply equally to other

forms of attachment as well. Attachment to possessions, people, ideals and communities can cause immense suffering when these are threatened or harmed and so there is a therefore a *prima facie* consequentialist reason for encouraging across-the-board detachment – not just detachment from one's avatar in an online world.

Conclusion

Proponents of the claim that avatar attachment is morally insignificant need to explain why avatar attachment is relevantly different from more traditional kinds of attachment. Attachments that we commonly recognise as morally legitimate are usually linked to personal narratives, identity and self-conception and are often located in a community of shared social expectations. Avatar attachment meets these criteria. Consistency therefore demands that we either treat avatar attachment in the same way or we encourage greater detachment from other more socially acceptable forms of attachment. If avatar attachment is seen as unhealthy or a cause of suffering, an argument must be given for why other forms of attachment are healthy, given that, as Buddhist philosophy tells us, all attachment is a cause of suffering. Attachment to people, possessions, ideals and communities means that we suffer when these are harmed. If we accept such suffering as the normal human condition and as the price we pay for the joy that attachment can bring us, then there is no reason not to accord avatar attachment the same moral standing.

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⁴⁷ Whang and Chang, p. 598.

⁴⁸ Dibbell.

⁴⁹ Whang and Chang, p. 595, 597.

⁵⁰ Whang and Chang, p. 595.

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