

Eight Shades of Moonlight A brief summary of the short fiction project

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The Internet has created new platforms for the construction and revision of identity, both communally and individually. Social media—whether it is direct communication tools like Facebook and Twitter, or less concrete but still highly social environments like Massively Multiplayer Online gaming communities—have made the process of crafting identity both more public and paradoxically less personal. Drawing upon a background in literature and journalism—as well as a youth spent in no small part playing too many video games and "wasting" too much time online—I hope to present a series of short fiction pieces that attempt to partially illustrate a few of the myriad ways in which virtual worlds and digital communities are now engaged in the formation of very "real" human identity. The Background: More and more basic human social interactions that have traditionally taken place in person are happening through the intermediary of the Internet. In many cases this is happening over social media networks (such as Facebook or Twitter) or in Massively Multiplayer Online games (such as World of Warcraft or Second Life). While some people use these programs to supplement their social lives, for others the social interaction these programs offer is a substitute for some—or all—of what would be considered traditional "real world" social lives. Basic Psychology tells us that social interactions, particularly the ones we have as children and adolescents, help to shape how we view others and ourselves. What effect, then, do virtual social interactions have on the development of human identity? Are these effects limited to the virtual environment in which the interactions occur? In what ways do the developments to identity rendered in virtual environments carry over to the individual's "real world"? The Project The form of my project is to compose a series of short stories looking at various "players" of a fictitious virtual community acting out the various stages of traditional identity development. My goal is to better understand how the development of a virtual identity conflicts and corresponds to a pre-existing "real" identity. More than anything, I want to help in some small part to begin to unpack the distinction between "virtual" identity and "real life" identity, and gauge how meaningful it still is to draw such a distinction. I believe it important to make one disclaimer here: I don't claim to be any kind of social scientist, be it psychologist, sociologist, or anthropologist. My background is in creative writing and journalism. If there are hard and fast quantitative answers to be given to the above questions, I don't pretend to have them. In one sense, fiction writing is fundamentally unscientific: a writer creates one story that, at its best, reflects or illuminates a much larger set of issues—but fundamentally this is also an exercise in inductive reasoning, which should cause any reasonable scientist to be understandably skeptical. Fiction writing is also something of an academic shortcut: one takes an ambiguous issue and injects it into a fictional environment that is completely controlled, creating the illusion that the issue itself is completely understood. It is therefore, of course, somewhat dangerous to treat fiction as definitive proof of anything. Rather, I think of this as my attempt to illustrate how some of these ideas might play out, given my own research and experiences. The Environment Pure social networking tools (such as Twitter and Facebook) allow normal human interaction over the Internet, but with few changes to the parameters. Second Life, with some alterations, is primarily an attempt to mimic reality—users get a second life, not necessarily a notably different one. All three are fertile grounds for study of identity and social interactions, however for my

purposes I found it more interesting to put my world in a fantastical setting, modeling it more after a game such as World of Warcraft or its MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) forerunners, like Everquest or Ultima Online. In this type of game, the tasks are starkly different from real life, but I contend that the social interactions are quite similar—cooperation, competition, in-/out-group dynamics, and trust are all on full display. Basically, one plays by the same social “rules,” even though the goals and steps needed to accomplish the task are completely foreign. (For example: the cooperation, coordination, and proper execution of individual tasks necessary to land a major new client for a business team are not really all that different—in principle—from the group dynamics of slaying a dragon, even if the different tasks involved—swinging a sword versus preparing a marketing plan, say—are significantly different.) Setting my stories in a game world with a more fantastical, alien setting also has the advantage of allowing me easier access to some of the earlier stages of identity development. Obviously, babies in the very earliest stages of identity formation don’t play video games... but someone learning a game for the first time might undergo similar psychological processes. Identity There are many different kinds of identity formation. As I said before, I am no social scientist. But allow me to define a few salient types of identity in very crude terms: -Cultural identity: the feeling of identifying with a group or culture -Religious identity: the beliefs and practices held by an individual which correspond to a larger codified set of practices, often related to communal faith and ritual -Professional identity: the outward persona adopted by a professional to more easily facilitate the achievement of business objectives -Gender identity: the gender with which an individual identifies and/or the gender that others attribute to that individual as a result of social gender norms -Self-concept: the sum total of an individual’s knowledge/understanding of herself All of these have some relevance to gaming communities: -Cultural identity: players are typically divided into two or more adversarial groups; over time, players often come to identify themselves within their chosen grouping -Religious identity: the holding of religious ceremonies in-game is not unheard of; certain events, characters, players and ideas sometimes attain great cultural significance, bordering on the mythical -Professional identity: more goal-oriented players often adopt personas that they believe will get them better in-game results -Gender identity: gender in many games is a choice—men can play as women and women can play as men; despite this, treatment still often differs widely depending on a player’s perceived gender (female characters, for example, are often perceived as being more emotional and more focused on serving the group rather than advancing themselves) -Self-concept: inclusive of the above, the way a player sees herself and her role in the game influences just about everything she does Identity Structure As a structuring mechanism, I have chosen to build some of my stories around Erik Erikson’s life-stage virtues. Erikson breaks down identity formation into eight stages, each one of which is characterized by the balance between two forces and the formation of one core “virtue.” They are as follows: Hope: trust vs. mistrust (ages 0-1): Does the individual trust its caregivers too much or too little? Will: autonomy vs. shame and doubt (ages 2-3): Individual begins to explore on its own; is the caregiver too neglectful or smothering? Purpose: initiative vs. guilt (ages 4-6): Can the individual function on her own, or is she made to feel guilty for acting independently? Competence: industry vs. inferiority (ages 7-13): Child begins to compare self to others; recognizes differences in ability Fidelity: identity vs. role diffusion (adolescence: ages 14-mid 20s): Deep questioning of self; conflict between self-exploration, freedom, and conformity Love: intimacy vs. isolation (mid 20s-early 40s): Beginning of deep commitments: who to love, where to live, what to dedicate one’s self to Caring: generativity vs. stagnation (early 40s- mid 60s):

So-called “mid-life crisis;” assessment of accomplishments/failures; has the individual done enough to pass along to the next generation? Wisdom: ego integrity vs. despair (mid 60s on): Reflections on past but with less agency to build upon it; more resignation; tension between tranquility and bitterness

Moving Forward Eventually I hope to compose a story looking at each of these eight stages of identity development in the context of my fictionalized digital environment. Stylistically I hope to split the difference, to strike a balance between writing about the players of these games but in the context of describing their in-game activities. Put another way, just as Milton’s stated goal in *Paradise Lost* was to “justify the ways of God to man,” then mine is to justify the ways of video games to those who dismiss them. It’s my belief that there really is much, much more going on in gaming than just the pushing of buttons and the saving of princesses. Fiction, for its part, is often too rigidly divided between “fantasy” and “literary fiction,” with readers from both sides of the divide too readily dismissing the other. If I can help to tear down the wall, I believe there’s an incredibly interesting borderland in between that’s well worth exploring. For my my May 27 presentation I read my first two stories. The first, “Out of the Sea” is mostly intended as an introduction to introduce readers to my world as a new player joins it. The second, “Boss, Lady” is structured around Erikson’s purpose stage, as a player begins to assert her independence from a former mentor.