

# Avatar Narratives: Identity and Social Mobility in Synthetic Worlds

Proposal for Dissertation

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## 1. Introduction and Context

With the extension of available computer networks, mankind has developed gradually two spheres of today's social life: the real world and the steadily-growing virtual worlds. 'Virtual world' is actually the most used term for a cultural phenomenon that is sometimes also called 'MMOG' (massively multiplayer online game), 'MMORPG' (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) or 'synthetic world'. I prefer the term 'synthetic world' (Castranova, 2006) because it highlights the fact that these 3D worlds are of human origin, and that they are real in the sense of being a social and economic arena.

Whereas we are represented in the real world with our physical body, we are in need of a digital representation in synthetic worlds. Such representations are called avatars, and, depending upon the virtual world setting, avatars can be chosen with different skills, style, sex, apparel, and race among other options. These options may vary from one synthetic world to another (Bartle, 2003), but normally avatars are 3-dimensional, interactive and controlled by the user via an interface. Their appearance can be changed to the player's imagination, and they can collect, buy or sell artefacts of different value within a synthetic world.

As avatars represent us in such environments, they occupy an interesting position in an increasing cultural, social, political and economical environment. Populations of single MMOGs like World of Warcraft are bigger than states like Austria (around 8 Mio; compare Woodcock, 2008), and the GNP per capita of MMOG Norrath is somewhere between Bulgaria and Russia (Castranova, 2001). The social and economical importance of synthetic worlds may increase dramatically as currently isolated MMOGs will be connected in the coming years to a synthetic world-metaverse: avatars could cross the boundaries of their original MMOG without losing or changing their identity.

The general aim of this research study is to clarify social mechanisms in synthetic worlds regarding identity crafting. Avatar identity is seen as the core of any future theory about social mobility in synthetic worlds and should provide a better understanding of social activities in such environments.

## 2. Research motivation, questions and objectives

### 2.1. Why should we research avatar identities?

As in our real world, economic, social and political transactions in synthetic worlds take place as an exchange of values among partners. As we want to decrease the amount of uncertainty of such a transaction, we want to know more about our partners. But who are the individuals behind their avatars? As there are no biometrical credentials offered by the game designers (Bartle, 2003), which are from a sociological (Goffman, 1965) and psychological (Turkle, 1997) point of view also very unlikely to be desired in synthetic worlds (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004), we may never know the real person behind the digital mask.

In social networks and web applications like eBay, reputation is used trustfully and widely to rate the individual's past and to anticipate future behaviour. In synthetic worlds, avatar reputation is also in use as personal capital for avatar interaction (Steinkuehler, 2004).

The concept of reputation however has its limits when an avatar is transferred to a new MMOG: avatars will have lost all of his/her social ties and therefore not only any source of reputation, but also the access to social resources within its existing network. Lin defines social capital as "*resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions*" (2001, p.29). As in most cases a fresh start (avatar or network building) is not an option (and in many cases this will be true as to rebuild a social network is a year-long investment), such transfer of social capital and reputation will be highly desirable. Therefore, avatars are in need of some means of taking their social capital and reputation wherever they go.

So why should we research avatar identities? Because typical ways of transmitting reputation in MMOGs (local relationships and orally mediated image) cannot be applied successfully as a means to create a transferable, long-standing reputation, the only possibility to 'store' social capital and reputation is a tie to a strong, visible identity. Identity means the story of someone's avatar and can be seen as the only source of information about our partner in synthetic worlds.

In such worlds, we use, among others (like avatar profiles, scores, group memberships), the technique of narratives. In real world, narratives in a broad sense enable us to create continuity and coherence and therefore identity (Straub, 2000). Depending on the audience, different aspects of identity will be 'highlighted' or covert (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2002). Therefore, Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann argue (2004) that narratives of self-experienced occurrences mean "Selbstdarstellung" (or "self-portrayal") and "Selbsterstellung" (or "self-creating"). Consequently, narrative identity can be defined as the unity of one person's life, encapsulating the way his/her stories are experienced and his/her experiences are articulated (Widdershoven, 1993). All events, which are part of a narrative identity, are not only actions of a single individual, but also the actions (answers, re-actions) of others involved in the story (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

In a digital environment, digital narratives engage a wide selection of different media and technical tools to 'tell the stories' (Hayles, 2008): written text including hyperlinks and references, images and illustrations, music and the own voice, as well as screencasts and videos. In the digital context, narratives may refer to the self – for example they refer to an account (real person) of a social network system; but they can also refer to a digital representation (the avatar) like in a synthetic world.

Similar to real world mechanisms (e.g. credentials, CVs), avatar identity needs to be made explicit in the growing field of synthetic worlds, if we want to meet the need for easier avatar cooperation. Where avatars interact in small groups for a long time, such settings do not need explicit records of avatar identity; but in a society of free moving avatars, there is the need for proof of credentials, reputation or similar. Narratives will record the story and offer continuity and digital identity: they serve as a digital book for whom ever wants to read and enhance it as well as to learn about the avatar he/she just met.

## **2.2. Research question**

Due to the growing significance of synthetic worlds and therefore of our representations there and the need to understand the mechanism of these societies, we have to see avatars as social entities in a social network. An essential element of this framework is avatar identity, which is created through the player–avatar history and social approval (see also Mead, 1973, respective real world social interaction). However, avatars exist in synthetic worlds only when they become involved in social practices. Otherwise they are not visible and therefore not existent (except in the database).

As said, in real world narratives enable us to formulate our own story as well as its embedding in a social context. The main research question deals with the role of narratives in the creation of an avatar identity as well as their consequence for reputation and social mobility within synthetic worlds (see also the illustration below). This said, this research study should ask:

- how an avatar identity is built upon narratives (research objective 2),
- how the social network of an avatar contributes to the building of an avatar identity (research objective 3),
- what role avatar identity plays in any social mobility theory in synthetic worlds (research objective 4), and
- what media / applications can be used to generate such an identity of digital traces, for example text, images, screencasts (research objective 2 and 5).

For a detailed outline of the research questions, see section 2.3 (research objectives).

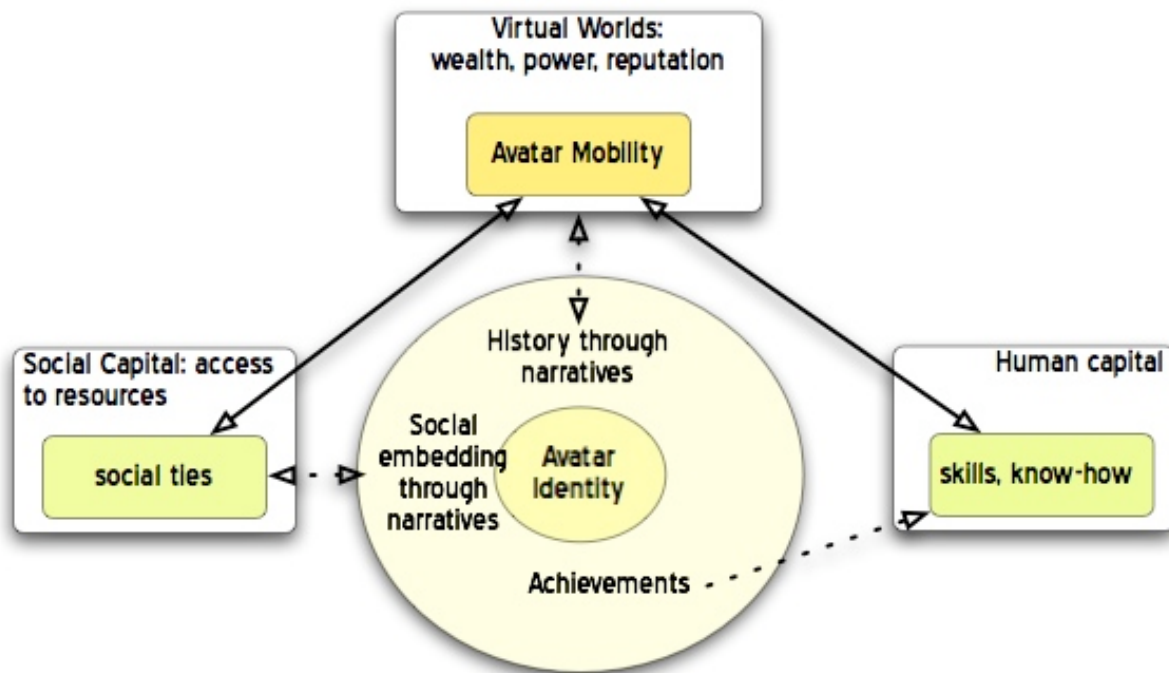


Illustration: Avatars rely on social capital (wide network of resources, for example) and human capital (master the game, skills, for example) to improve their social status, but the only way to do so successfully is to claim an avatar identity.

### 2.3. Objectives of research:

In line with the research question above, I formulated the following objectives of research as a project path:

#### 1. Objective 1 – Evaluation of synthetic worlds (status quo):

To gain an overview of MMOGs in terms of size of population, game design, tools of identity management, and applications to store social data of avatars. This part of the study should help to decide which synthetic worlds will be the prime context of research. An ideal research environment is a synthetic world with a vibrant community life, open to new members, using 3D avatars, and encouraging cooperative game behaviour.

#### 2. Objective 2 (“avatar identity”):

To define the main factors and processes of avatar identity creation. This is the core of my research study and should ask the following questions:

- What is identity in synthetic worlds except a fictive avatar name?
- How are narratives applied in identity crafting?
- How does the design of synthetic worlds influence the process of avatar identity creation?

#### 3. Objective 3 (“avatar networks”):

To understand the role of a social network regarding avatar identity creation. Questions:

- What practices does a social network apply to form an avatar identity?

- What happens to avatar identity when avatars connect with or move out to other groups / social networks?

#### 4. **Objective 4 (“avatar social capital”):**

To study the significance of an explicit avatar identity for social capital transfer and social mobility. Questions:

- How do avatars cooperate within and outside of social networks?
- And how is social capital created and used to facilitate social mobile avatars?

As a result of objectives 1–4, it is anticipated that I will produce a theoretical model about creating avatar identities through narratives and the role of avatar identities in any social interaction in synthetic worlds.

#### 5. **Objective 5 (“explicit avatar identity”):**

To generate a technical model for an explicit avatar identity. This should be based on the findings of my previous objectives and create a model for a dynamic avatar identity. This technical model could be used for the future synthetic world–metaverse as well as for current MMOGs.

### 2.4. **Contribution to knowledge**

As there are very few studies about avatar identity (e.g. Yee, 2007) and social mobility (e.g. Malabi, 2006), the proposed research study will enhance scientific knowledge in the field of anthropology of cyberculture (cf section 3.2 below). To be more specific, the results of my objectives could link to existing theories (which are outlined in section 3.1.) regarding the potential of narratives in the context of avatar identity creation. Furthermore, the technical model of avatar identity could be used as a prototype for further developments of identity systems in synthetic worlds. The effects of such technical models of avatar identity could be the focus of another, following research study.

## 3. **Outlines of Methodology**

In this section, I want to refer to existing theories in my research topic’s theory body as well to argue for an ethnomethodological approach to my studies.

### 3.1. **Scientific context of my research questions**

The purpose of this section is to list existing theories that are of value to be considered, discussed and potentially enhanced by my research study. They will later (in the research project) serve as a reference to compare patterns and concepts I found during my study.

From my research questions’ perspective, avatar identity is understood as recognised, acknowledged identity of a player’s representation by other players. Furthermore, avatar identity is created and made visible by the

avatar's social network. Therefore, my research topic's theory body includes works and ideas of identity formation (e.g., Keupp, 2002), narrative identity (e.g., Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2002), social capital theory (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986), theory of social structure (Lin, 2001), theory of symbolic interaction (Goffman, 1959), social mobility theory (e.g., Sorokin, 1927), migration sociology (e.g., Esserer, 1980), network analysis (e.g. Granovetter, 1973), media theory (e.g., McLuhan, 1967), virtual world design (e.g., Bartle, 2003), and avatar theory (including economic and social aspects: Castranova, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2004).

### **3.2. Methodological considerations**

A very important part of any research project is the question how to research: different research methods will produce different results or types of knowledge. A comprehensive answer to my research question will only be possible if different kinds of data are collected to result in different but complementary types of knowledge (Pole, Lampard 2002).

In this section, I want to outline the main scientific discipline and my methodological approach regarding my research study. This serves also as a base for the methods I propose (section 4).

#### **Socio-cultural Anthropology and Ethnomethodology**

As our representation in synthetic worlds is a socio-cultural entity, avatar identities are influenced by socio-cultural values and settings. If we want to understand the process of avatar identity forming, we have to look at the practices of social networks regarding their modes of accepting, forming and connecting their members and therefore their identities. Anthropology is the study of humanity and emphasizes the examination of the context to compare cultures and their values, as described by Geertz (1973): a socio-cultural fact must be embedded in a dense description of the scene to be understood by the observer, who will explain and interpret social forms of expression.

Modern anthropology sees the world as a collection of many different cultures that have not passed through a single evolutionary process. They cannot be generalized, but must be studied in particular (Stocking, 1974). Socio-cultural anthropology is an interpreting science seeking for meaning, not for generalized models of culture. Unlike the sociologist, the anthropologist cannot isolate one theme from a bigger context, but must research the 'complete' system, as the studied culture is new to the anthropology researcher. Thus, socio-cultural anthropology is a very relevant scientific approach to research avatar identity forming in different synthetic worlds: avatars can be seen as a cultural achievement that differs from synthetic world to another.

One of the main methodological approaches in the field of anthropology is ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1984). Ethnomethodology examines how people make sense of their world, how they show their understanding to others, and how they create a shared social order in which they live. Further, ethnomethodology is concerned with how (by which procedures and

practices) social order is produced. Ethnomethodology does not produce any abstract theories, but descriptions of the methods members of societies and groups use to do what ever they do (Garfinkel, 1984).

The main arguments for ethnomethodology (to be used in my research as methodology) are:

- Ethnomethodology is interested in how social reality makes sense to their members: the study asks about social order and identity.
- Ethnomethodology wants to find out what means people use to describe social entities: the study is interested in how avatar identity is created as and through narratives.

Applied to my research topic, Ethnomethodology would ask about the effects of MMOGs on player's representations, the process of avatar creation, life and usage. It would investigate the available technical tools and compare different MMOGs to understand the different outcomes on avatar identity mobility. It would do so producing a dense description of interactive cultural and material practices. The actual ethnomethodological methods for this study will be discussed in the next section.

## **4. Methods for Data Collection**

In this section, I want to review methods for data collection, which are relevant to reach my research goals. I will do so by referring to each research objective. The main data source would be a synthetic world that offers game play through avatars, social interactions with others and a history of several years (to have enough networks and players of different expertise and avatar age).

### **4.1. Data collection for objective 1: Evaluation of synthetic worlds (status quo)**

By consulting relevant literature, web sites, and online game discussion boards, a list of synthetic worlds will be generated. I will develop also a list of criteria (e.g. game population, availability of 3D avatars and groups, game design favourable toward group activities, overall costs, technical access) that will be the basis for an evaluation of the synthetic worlds and serve as a decision support tool: I want to identify the best suited synthetic world for the following research (regarding objectives 2–4).

I will also identify relevant, alternative MMOGs, which will be used for extensive data collection for objectives 2–4.

### **4.2. Data collection for objective 2: Research the creation of avatar identity**

My goal at this stage is to define the main factors and processes of avatar identity creation:

1. What is identity in synthetic worlds except a fictive avatar name?
2. Are narratives applied in identity crafting, and if so, how?

### 3. How does the design of synthetic worlds influence the process of avatar identity creation?

I suggest using a set of methods, which can generate a dense description of the researched MMOG cultures “to get the picture”. The preferred way of anthropologists used in their research of cultures is to ‘write about people’ (Geertz, 1988). This ethnographic approach is mainly based on fieldwork that asks for the researcher’s participation in the daily life of the observed culture.

Actually, question 1 of this objective would be addressed by participative observation, taking field notes in a research diary, and reviewing sources of digital stories and documents about avatars. The same methods as well as interviewing key informants would provide data for question 2.

Researching different MMOGs would collect data for question 3: a sample of 3–5 MMOGs including a description of functions, design and other structural elements as well as interviews with key informants.

#### **4.3. Objective 3: Research the factor “social network”**

My goal at this stage is to understand the role of a social network regarding avatar identity creation:

1. What practices does a social network apply to form an avatar identity?
2. What happens to avatar identity when avatars connect with or move out to other groups / social networks?

Similar to objective 2, I propose to conduct participative observation (this includes also taking pictures (screenshots) and videos (screencasts)), interviewing key informants and researching methods of users to communicate through their avatars (outside / inside of MMOGs, e.g. in discussion boards, chat rooms and other places of social interaction) as main methods for data collection for question 1 and 2. Personal field notes would enhance this data.

#### **4.4. Objective 4: Research the social capital transfer**

My goal at this stage is to study the significance of an explicit avatar identity for social capital transfer and social mobility:

1. How do avatars cooperate within and outside of social networks?
2. And how is social capital created and used to facilitate social mobile avatars?

Again, the main approach to collect data for both questions is participative observation, interviewing key informants and access biographical data of avatars and their relationships. In general, I would collect all available forms of data that could help to describe and explain the research question (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1986) and providing a triangulation of them.

My field notes and recorded data should be structured into ‘observational notes’, ‘theoretical notes’ and ‘methodological notes’ to distinguish their

origin. In this way there are always separate notes for each observation but for a different purpose (Schatzmann and Strauss (1973)).

The collection of data of objectives 2–4 would generate dense descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of social interaction, showing the way of avatar life cycles, their creation, their interaction with others, and most important, their perception by others. Michael Agar calls this sort of Ethnography narrative. As an example, Steinkuehler (2004) used this method for her dissertation about learning in MMOGs.

#### **4.5. Objective 5: Prototype an explicit avatar identity**

At this stage, I will translate my analyzed data of objectives 2–4 (patterns and concepts, see section 5.2) into an applied technology that could facilitate and strengthen the process of creating an avatar identity. The base of the technical application will be a tool that is suitable to record one's own reflections and others' comments, to provide the essentials of explicit identity and to collect digital traces. Such a tool should be created on available technology (open source) to minimize costs, programming effort and easy enhancement by others.

## **5. Methods for Data Analysis**

The main argument for using ethnographical methods is to analyze unstructured data without a pre-defined theory first. The researcher is open to group and to conclude schemas and patterns, to re-evaluate them immediately in the field and to proceed to results, which are grounded. Regarding my research, there is no appropriate avatar identity theory, why I have to try to find so-called rich points (Agar, 1996) first. Rich points are terms and actions, which are not understood by the researcher because of his different cultural background (e.g. South Indian villagers place a small lump of charcoal on top of lunch packages before leaving the village for another town. Obviously, there is a rich point for westerners to be explained "why?"). To understand the idea behind these rich points, the researcher must seek for explanations directly from the involved people and check them against other data found to model coherence.

The final outcome of this method, which can be described as continuous trying, falsifying and modifying process of available data within a schema (explanative context or knowledge structure), is to generate a stable hypothesis based on the many schemas identified and explained. As a second outcome, this rich data set (and therefore the described schemas) can be linked to existing theories in related fields of research (as listed in section 3.1).

Following, I want to outline in this section methods for data analysis, which are relevant to reach my research goals.

#### **5.1. Objective 1: Evaluation of synthetic worlds (status quo)**

The collected data of phase 1 of my research (an overview about MMOGs in terms like population, activity and avatar use) would be put into a spreadsheet and evaluated according a set of factors that helps me to choose the proper MMOG for my research study. A pre-requisite is to select and justify the relevant factors at this part of phase 1 of my research. The evaluation method would be a weighted evaluation (factors of different significance) of single MMOGs.

## **5.2. Data analysis for objective 2: Research the creation of avatar identity**

My goal at this stage is to define the main factors and processes of avatar identity creation:

1. What is identity in synthetic worlds except a fictive avatar name?
2. Are narratives applied in identity crafting, and if so, how?
3. How does the design of synthetic worlds influence the process of avatar identity creation?

The data collection process generated a dense description of the researched MMOG cultures: varied records about the avatars observed. Such descriptions are observations of what the anthropologist sees and hears. They will hold an extensive volume of data, which is unstructured at first. Everything is noticed, but not put into a pre-fixed schema.

The method I suggest to follow is now to reread all parts (“strips”, Agar 1996) of the material several times, to find rich points and to put them into a first model of coherence. This will lead to a knowledge schema (or frame, see Agar, 1996) for a specific field, which can explain the rich point. Other strips will have to be tested if they can fill in to the developed schema. If not, the schema must be adapted, and so on. The first two questions will be answered in a narrative way, combining several discovered knowledge schemas, and resulting in a comprehensive explanation of avatar identity and identity crafting in synthetic worlds.

Regarding question 3, I suggest to compare my generated data with my knowledge schemas (from question 1 and 2) and existing media theories (see section 3.1). The outcome of this task will lead to a grounded hypothesis.

## **5.3. Objective 3: Research the factor “social network”**

My goal at this stage is to understand the role of a social network regarding avatar identity creation:

1. What practices does a social network apply to form an avatar identity?
2. What happens to avatar identity when avatars connect with or move out to other groups / social networks?

Similar to objective 2, I propose first analysing strips for rich points to get schemas. Typically, the anthropologist considers the total context, sorting for topics and adding subheadings. The entire content will be added to broader and narrower headings and categories, indexed together with external sources (like literature reviews, interviews) and outside typologies

critically reviewed (Okely, 1994). With ‘outside typologies’ I refer to the fact that originally anthropology was the science of westerners to research non-western cultures. The outsider view can still be seen in the way foreign cultures were put in a certain typology. To avoid the danger of mapping the researcher’s idea of the world over the understanding of the researched culture, outside typologies must be reviewed critically. For example, many sociologists use the term “homeless people”, whereas these people call themselves tramps (Spradley, 1979, p. 18).

The results of such a dense description lead to new schemas, sometimes even to a new or improved typology (Okely, 1994), which is a characteristic of anthropology: the open-ended approach. The resulting narrative will consist of solved rich points and explained schemas, as well as checked against existing theories in this field (see chapter 3.1.).

#### **5.4. Objective 4: Research the social capital transfer**

My goal at this stage is to study the significance of an explicit avatar identity for social capital transfer and social mobility:

1. How do avatars cooperate within and outside of social networks?
2. And how is social capital created and used to facilitate social mobile avatars?

Again, the main approach to analyse data for both questions is the method described in sections 5.2 and 5.3.: to find rich points, to explain them by forming schemas and to modify them as long as strips of data don’t fit in. The researcher comes to his/her interpretation of data through a combination of anthropological knowledge and textual scrutiny, but also “*through the memory of field experience, unwritten yet inscribed in the fieldworker’s being*” (Okely, 1994, p. 31).

Finally, I want to compare my schemas to existing theories in this field (see section 3.1.) to draw conclusions for my own hypothesis or existing theories alike.

#### **5.5. Objective 5: Prototype an explicit avatar identity**

As a result of objectives 1–4, it is anticipated that I will produce a theoretical model about creating avatar identities through narratives and the role of avatar identities in any social interaction in synthetic worlds:

1. Based on my schemas, I will outline the main characteristics of an avatar identity regarding objectives 3 and 4.
2. From this, I will develop a conceptual model of functions, important avatar data and necessary attributes of an explicit model (tool) of avatar identity.

The result of objective 5 (an explicit model of avatar identity) won’t be further analyzed regarding its impact in synthetic worlds as this would lead to a next set of field studies: How do MMOG players apply such tool to facilitate avatar identity crafting? Such technical models of avatar identity would be a suggestion to further research.

## 6. Conclusion

As outlined, the general aim of this research study is to clarify social mechanisms in synthetic worlds regarding identity crafting. The main research question deals with the role of narratives in the creation of an avatar identity as well as their consequence for reputation and social mobility within synthetic worlds.

Due to the fact that this research is focused on cultural artefacts (avatars), an ethnomethodological approach is argued for. Ethnographic methods for collecting and analysing data will be conducted to receive grounded results from an 'unknown' cultural environment.

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