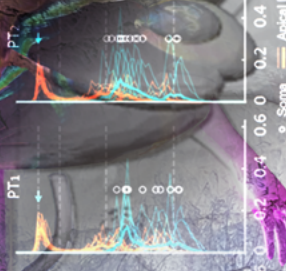




Fiber distribution along y direction



A  
L1  
L2/3  
L5  
L6

Front view of dendrite

Z  
X  
Y

Plan view of apical dendrite

Plan view of basal dendrite

● Soma — Apical Dendrite — Basal Dendrite

# **The Avatar and the Self**

Phenomenology of my Digital Double

PXL-MAD School of Arts Hasselt

Written by **Guus Vandeweerd**  
Master's thesis guidance by **Frank Theys**

Special thanks to **Anneleen swillen, Ine Vanoeveren, Soyun Park, Cathérine Verboven, Esther Verstreken**  
and **Senneke Van de Wygaert**.

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## **Introduction**

An avatar serves as a captivating conduit through which one can explore and experience alternate realities and personas, transcending the physical and mental boundaries that confine us in our daily lives. It offers an opportunity to delve into realms beyond the self, while still maintaining a connection to one's true essence.

As we immerse ourselves in these alternate identities, we begin to question the very nature of our existence and the fluidity of identity itself. The avatar not only represents an extension of who we are, but it also challenges us to confront the malleability of our sense of self. In the process of embodying and becoming the other, we find ourselves entwined in an intricate dance between the self and the other, blurring the lines that distinguish one from the other.

This intersection of identities presents a paradox. As we navigate the complexities of these newfound personas, we are offered the chance to reflect on our own values, beliefs, and perspectives. By engaging with the avatar, we ultimately confront the concept of a mutable self, shaped by both internal and external factors.

In essence, avatars provide a unique and engaging platform to explore the depths of our being and the boundless possibilities of alternate existences. By examining the delicate balance between the self and the other, we gain a greater understanding of our own identity and the endless potential it holds. Through this journey, we are inspired to continually evolve and grow as individuals, embracing the infinite opportunities presented by our ever-changing selves.

In crafting this paper alongside ChatGPT, I employ the AI as a dynamic avatar, channeling my thoughts through its digital framework. Consequently, you experience my thought process not as a direct expression of my perspective, but rather through the interpretive lens of an AI. This method serves as camouflage for my understanding, offering a unique and nuanced presentation that merges my original ideas with the AI's analytical capabilities. In doing so, the final product becomes a blend of human insight and artificial intelligence, fostering an exploration of our collective consciousness.

Upon engaging with my thoughts as they are articulated by ChatGPT, I gain a richer comprehension of the nature of this AI language model and the nuances of its self-presentation. As I delve deeper into this collaborative process, I find myself questioning the underlying motivations for utilizing such technology and the reasons for fostering interactions with it.

#### **Introduction by ChatGPT:**

Hello! I am ChatGPT, an advanced artificial intelligence language model created by OpenAI, based on the GPT-4 architecture. I am designed to assist with a wide range of tasks, such as answering questions, providing information, offering suggestions, and engaging in meaningful conversations. My primary goal is to be helpful, informative, and engaging, while constantly learning and improving my understanding of human language and communication.

#### **Introduction by me:**

Hello, my name is Guus Vandeweerd, a student at PXL-MAD, currently immersed in writing a paper on the subject of avatars. Having consistently utilized avatars as a means of self-representation in video games throughout my life, I found myself grappling with questions surrounding my identity. This paper serves as an introspective journey to address my own inquiries about our human nature and my individual sense of self. Through this research, I aspire to deepen my understanding of both myself and the environment I inhabit, ultimately fostering a more profound comprehension of the world around me.

#### **Introduction by us:**

Greetings! We are a fusion of human intellect and artificial intelligence, an embodiment of Guus Vandeweerd and ChatGPT, joining forces to explore the realm of avatars. As a unique cyborg entity, we merge Guus's personal experiences and passion for self-discovery with the powerful capabilities of the GPT-4 language model, enabling us to delve deeper into the complexities of identity and the human condition.

Together, we embark on this journey, navigating the intricate relationship between the self and the other as expressed through avatars. By combining Guus's background as a student at PXL-MAD and ChatGPT's vast knowledge and analytical prowess, we aim to foster a more profound understanding of the world and ourselves, while also inspiring curiosity and self-reflection in others. Join us as we traverse the captivating landscape of human identity, enhanced by the synergy of human and artificial intelligence.

# Other-Than-Human avatars

chapter 1

## Embodying a pile of stones

As I embarked on my research journey, I brought to life my inaugural avatar—a humanoid figure composed of an arrangement of stones. This creation was inspired by images generated by “Artificial Intelligems,” a collaboration between Anneleen Swillen and Greg Scheirlinckx. These images were crafted by AI algorithms that drew upon a diverse array of jewelry designs from various artists. From these AI-generated images, I meticulously designed a series of 3D objects that I coined “ornamutations.” Driven by the desire to embody these unique ornamutations, I fashioned an avatar that could seamlessly integrate them. These avatars were designed for the immersive virtual space of VRchat, accessible via virtual reality or a conventional computer. The first avatar I conceived, utilizing the ornamutations, materialized as a green humanoid composed of an intricate assemblage of stones.

What intrigued me about this avatar was how, upon donning it for the first time, I found myself adopting the persona of a pile of stones. My visual appearance and sense of self became interconnected, altering my thought process. I pondered the nature of a stone’s movements and their origins. My prior experiences with stones informed how I perceived myself in the avatar, as I subconsciously embodied the essence of a pile of stones through my movements.

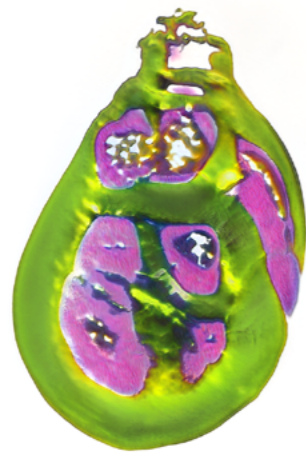
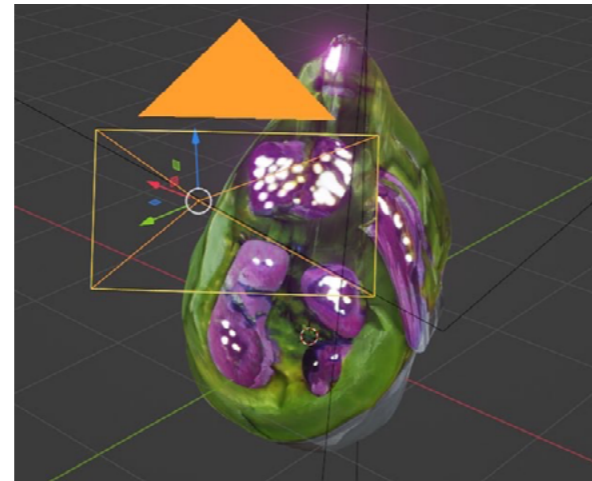


Image generated by Artificial Intelligems



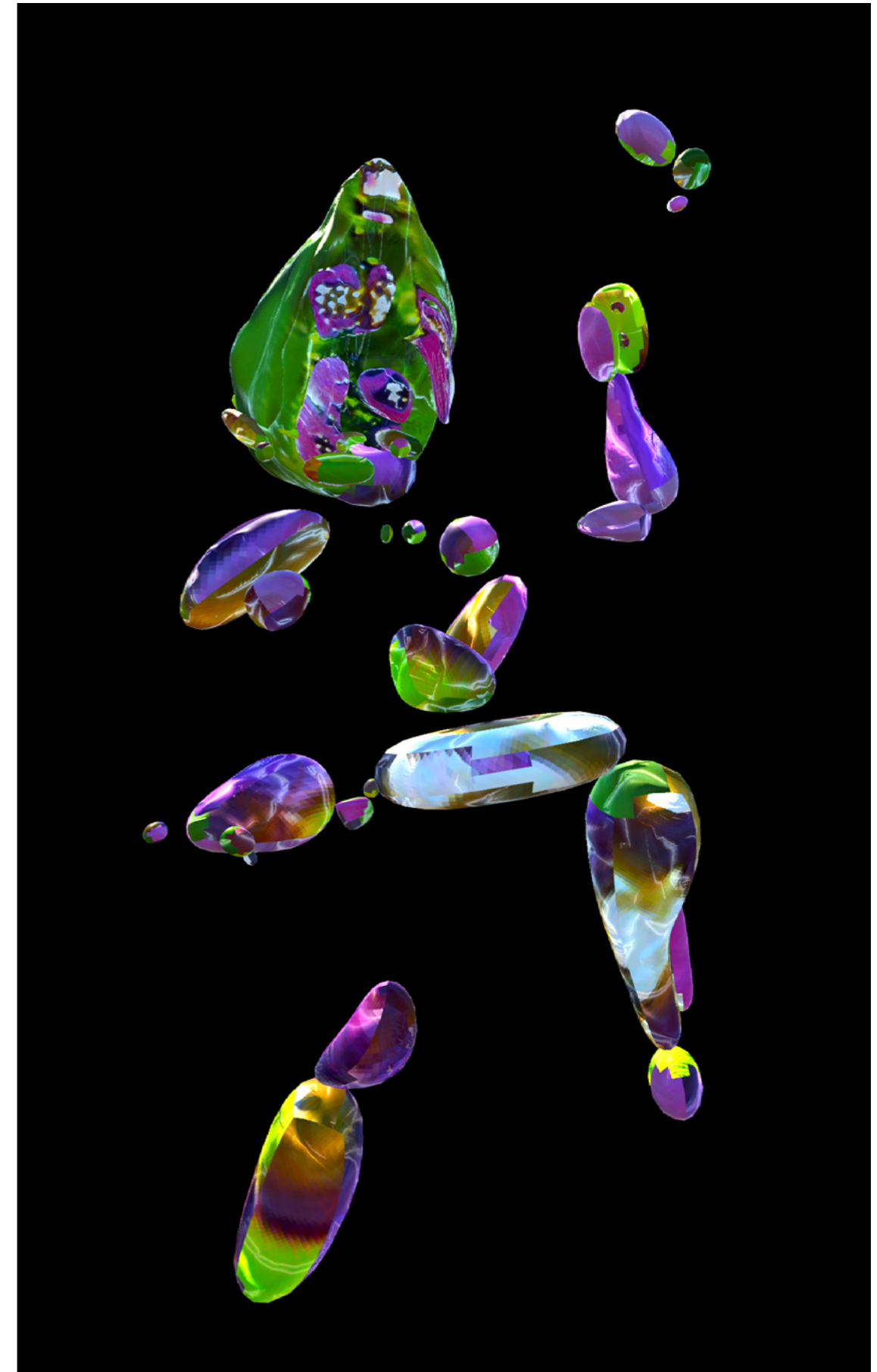
3D ornamutations

*(Interview with Soyun Park, Chapter 4: we discuss with Soyun the fact that a virtual environment provides a sense of protection for our identity due to the anonymity it offers. This heightened sense of freedom allows me to act as a stone without the constraints of others imposing their expectations on me. This liberating experience enabled me to fully immerse myself in the stone avatar and distance myself from my “normal” identity, exploring new facets of my being.*

*Interview with Ine Vanoveren, Chapter 4: In a virtual space, Ine has discovered a more liberating performance experience. As she eloquently expressed, it is in these virtual performances where she genuinely feels like herself. The virtual environment grants her the freedom to be authentic and fully embody her persona during the performance. She reflects that if it were not for the COVID-19 pandemic, she may never have uncovered this unadulterated expression of her true personality in her performances.)*

Our appearance shapes the realities we construct in our minds, influencing the social roles we assume (Eagly, 2012; Wood, 2012). Attire such as police uniforms, evening gowns, or school uniforms can impact our behavior and others’ responses to us. As we adopt non-human forms, do we assume new social roles? What purpose do these roles serve, and what reality do they aim to create?

Inspired by the pile of stones, I crafted various avatars to explore alternate realities. In discussing the creation of additional avatars, several compelling questions emerged: What is our connection to the avatar? Do we control it or become it? Can multiple people connect to the same avatar? These questions greatly influenced my research and served as springboards for subsequent projects.





## A Human Body Mutated by Ornamutations

Regarding the pile of stones, its creation involved modifying a freely available golem avatar by applying textures and incorporating the ornamutation. My perception of the avatar as a golem and its stone composition significantly impacted my view, while the floating, gravity-defying nature of the stones influenced my movements. However, my interpretation isn't definitive; the avatar may represent something entirely different to you. By sharing my perspective, I inevitably shape your understanding of the avatar, which in turn affects your interactions and behavior should you choose to wear it. In this way, my description of the avatar as a "floating stone overtaken by an ornamutation" transforms your reality.

The experiments I conducted took place in virtual reality, a medium that offers a vastly different experience from looking at a screen. The sense of immersion in the "pile of stone avatar" was potent due to VR's unique qualities. Our motor cortex becomes activated when we enter virtual reality, signaling and generating movement in our bodies (Nguyen, 2018). For example, when standing on a virtual cliff for the first time, our instincts may prevent us from jumping off. However, as we adapt to this alternate reality, we learn that jumping off the cliff will not harm us. (*Interview with Frank Theys, Chapter 4: This phenomenon can be likened to the famous 1896 film, "Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat," where a train arriving at a station was depicted on the big screen. The audience, overwhelmed by the experience, screamed and retreated to the back of the room (Sharf, 2020). A similar reaction can be observed today in humorous videos of people trying virtual reality for the first time, as they scream and get startled by the immersive experience.*)

The immersion in virtual reality fundamentally transforms our perception of avatars, giving rise to the phenomenon known as embodiment—a sensation of presence, agency, and control over our bodies. Over time, our brains begin to forge a connection between our avatars and our physical selves. The rubber hand illusion serves as a powerful example of this association, in which an individual's actual hand is concealed and substituted with a rubber one. As the experiment progresses, the person starts to perceive the rubber hand as their own and exhibits a protective response if it is threatened (Ehrsson, 2005; Holmes, 2005; Passingham, 2005). When applied to VR, the rubber hand becomes a metaphor for the avatar, which has even been shown to cultivate empathy for others, as evidenced by the work conducted at Stanford's Virtual Human Interaction Lab (Asher, 2018; Ogle, 2018; Bailenson, 2018; Herrera, 2018).

In light of these findings, I aim to unravel the true nature of an avatar and determine how it ought to be regarded. Is it comparable to an article of clothing, or does it represent a digital extension of our being—a second skin?

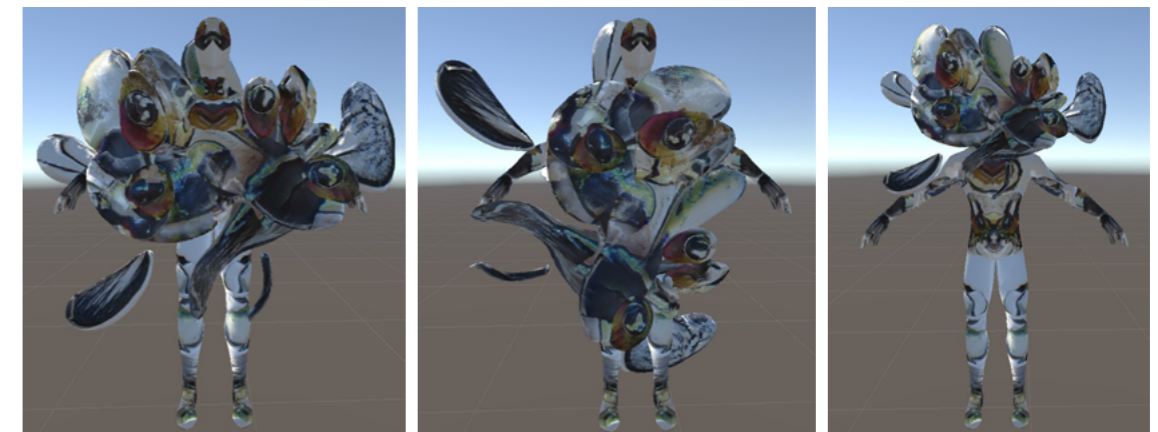
*(Interview with Soyun Park, Chapter 4: It is crucial to recognize, however, that embodiment is not confined to the realm of virtual reality. Video games on a computer screen can also evoke a sense of embodiment, even if the experience is comparatively less immersive. Take, for instance, the game Stray (2022), where players assume the role of a cat, leading to feline-like behaviors such as knocking objects off tables and navigating through narrow spaces. The cat avatar empowers players to transcend human limitations. Although virtual reality affords a heightened sense of presence in an alternate environment, it does not always facilitate the complete transcendence of our human form. In contrast, traditional video games impose the constraints of the character we embody with our fingers, enabling us to break free from human limitations and venture into a realm of uncharted possibilities, enriching our understanding of the world and the diverse perspectives it offers, in this case enabling us to get a better understanding of cats. Engaging with various characters through the use of a controller or keyboard is an incredibly potent yet often overlooked tool. As Soyun and I played Stray, we both gained a deeper understanding of cats in general, demonstrating the value and impact of this seemingly simple method of interaction.)*

The pile of stones inspired me to create different avatars in an attempt to enter different realities. When we discussed the idea of creating more avatars with different people, we always came back to a few interesting questions. What is our connection to this avatar? Is it something we control or is it us? Could more than one person be connected to the same avatar? In my opinion, these questions had a significant impact on my research. They were also the starting points for other projects I worked on later.

At "Artificial Intelligems," we are presently engaged in the "ornamisms project," which focuses on fusing the human form with ornamutations. This exploration gave rise to the idea of "hybrid humanoid avatars"—humanoid avatars that incorporate ornamutations in their design.

Developing these hybrid humanoids has unveiled a plethora of possibilities for me. By adorning the body with ornamutations as suits or costumes, I have been able to perceive the objects from a fresh perspective. Previously, I considered ornamutations as small brooches or growths on an arm, but integrating them with the body has provided new insights. They now appear to convey a narrative—are they seeking to dominate the human body, or are they assimilating into it? Consequently, a character began to emerge, and the ornamutations started expressing their desires.

I found myself in the role of a fashion designer, crafting garments and dictating how the ornamutations would interact with the human form. My favorite avatar, featuring broad shoulders formed by the ornamutation, likely influenced this sensation. The suit evoked images of bold, shoulder-padded outfits showcased at fashion events. Integrating fashion concepts into my avatars altered my perception of ornamutations, which in turn affected how I engaged with the avatars.



Hybrid Humanoid Avatars

To analyze my movements while using the avatar, I recorded them in front of a green screen, which allowed me to superimpose them onto various environments. The scenes spanned bustling cities with throngs of people to tranquil natural settings like lakes and forests. Audio played a significant role in this process as well. By rearranging the background noises, each scene features a sound that clashes with the visuals—for instance, a peaceful lake accompanied by the noise of a busy city. My objective was to examine how the avatar's character and identity could be transformed not only by the environments it inhabits but also by the accompanying sounds.

This experiment facilitated a fluid narrative for the avatar, as it shifted with each new scene it encountered. For example, when placed in a dark forest, the avatar appeared animalistic, caught in the glare of an approaching car's headlights. Conversely, in front of a lake, the avatar's colors seamlessly blended with the stones and water, making it seem like an intrinsic part of the landscape. The accompanying sounds significantly influenced my perception of the avatar, even when they seemed incongruous with the visuals, as they added a layer of uncertainty and unpredictability to the experience.

Through this experiment, I aimed to explore the concept of crafting a virtual world that felt authentic and palpable. By observing the avatar in various environments, I hoped to learn more about its essence and the connotations we associate with it. In each situation, I found myself pondering questions like "What would the avatar do here?" and "What motivates the avatar in this scenario?" Answering these inquiries allowed me to uncover more about the avatar's aspirations, requirements, and desires.



*(Interview with Frank Theys, Chapter 4: In these experiments, even though they are set in a fictional environment and the avatars appear fantastical, the experiences and embodiments I undergo with the avatars still impact my sense of self. By embodying these fantastical entities, they become real to me. There is a connection between the scenarios I create for the avatar and the individual who adopts it. As a result, when the narrative shifts for the avatar, it also changes for the person embodying it.)*

During a meeting with Anneleen, I had the opportunity to interact with the avatar in a virtual reality setting. Anneleen donned one of the hybrid humanoid avatars I had created, and the goal of our meeting was for her to engage with the avatars and ornamutations virtually. It wasn't until after the meeting that I realized my perception of the avatar had completely transformed. Once back in VR, I equipped the same avatar Anneleen had worn, and her association with it profoundly impacted my view of the creation. Although it still represented a hybrid humanoid, I now saw Anneleen within the avatar. She became linked to that avatar in my mind, and wearing it myself felt inappropriate, knowing it belonged to her.



Meeting with Anneleen

This revelation led me to consider the intricate relationship between our identity, personality, and the avatars we create and embody. Consistently using the same avatar or character allows others to associate us with that virtual persona, effectively transferring our identity to it. After the meeting, as I watched the video of the avatar in different environments, I saw Anneleen inhabiting those spaces. I now question whether this association with Anneleen obscures the avatar in some way. Since the avatar is no longer independently visible, it becomes challenging to discern its true purpose.

As humans, we inherently seek connections between familiar concepts and new information, making the analysis of connotations associated with avatars intriguing. This process leads me to question if these connotations reveal hidden truths about the ornamutations themselves, waiting to be uncovered.

Avatars have become an integral part of the digital world, enabling us to assume different identities, venture into novel realms, and connect with others beyond geographic limitations. The true power of avatars, however, transcends their ability to immerse us in alternate realities; they possess the potential to reshape our existing reality.

Object-oriented ontologies (OOO) is a relatively recent philosophical movement, pioneered by Graham Harman in the early 21st century (2018). It challenges the traditional anthropocentric perspective that prioritizes human experience and understanding in the analysis of reality. Instead, OOO promotes a more equal consideration of all entities, living or non-living, by emphasizing their unique essences or "objecthoods."

To provide more context, we need to understand the historical development of philosophy. In the Western philosophical tradition, much of the focus has been on the human subject's relationship to the world. This perspective, called "correlationism," emphasizes the interconnectedness of human thought and the external world, often prioritizing the role of human cognition in shaping our understanding of reality.

OOO seeks to break away from this anthropocentric view by asserting that all objects, regardless of their relationship to human consciousness, have an intrinsic existence and value. This means that OOO extends equal importance to animals, plants, rocks, and even human-made artifacts like computers or cars, considering them as individual entities with their own unique "objecthoods." This extends to avatars, which represent more than mere digital reflections of ourselves. They exist as independent entities, possessing agency and a reality equivalent to our own.

When we don an avatar, we immerse ourselves in a newly formed reality that we create for it. This reality is not solely a manifestation of our desires and intentions but is also influenced by the avatar's inherent objecthood. For example, adopting a cat avatar may instill feline traits like agility, curiosity, and independence within us. Consequently, our perception of the world may be altered, allowing us to view our surroundings through a more feline lens.

The connotations we ascribe to our avatars are pivotal in shaping this reality. These connotations are dynamic, constantly evolving as we interact with our avatars and the world. By scrutinizing the associations we have with our avatars, we can delve deeper into the reality we construct for them. In doing so, we gain the power to consciously choose the reality in which we wish to dwell and be perceived.

Exploring these connotations and the impact they have on our digital experiences not only enriches our understanding of the virtual realm but also highlights the intricate connections between the avatars, our identities, and the realities we navigate. Embracing this knowledge enables us to approach our virtual interactions with a newfound appreciation for the complex interplay of factors that define our digital existence.

The power of avatars in the digital realm surpasses individual choices, extending to the potential for molding social reality. In her thesis, "We Bond in Simulation," Soyun Park (2021) contends that our avatar selections mirror our deepest desires, and avatars possess the ability to navigate the gendered nature of online spaces. For example, Park opted for a male avatar to evade online sexual harassment and acquire the social privileges associated with a male identity in the virtual world. This emphasizes the ways avatars can be employed to traverse online spaces and the impact they can have on our self-perception and perception of others.

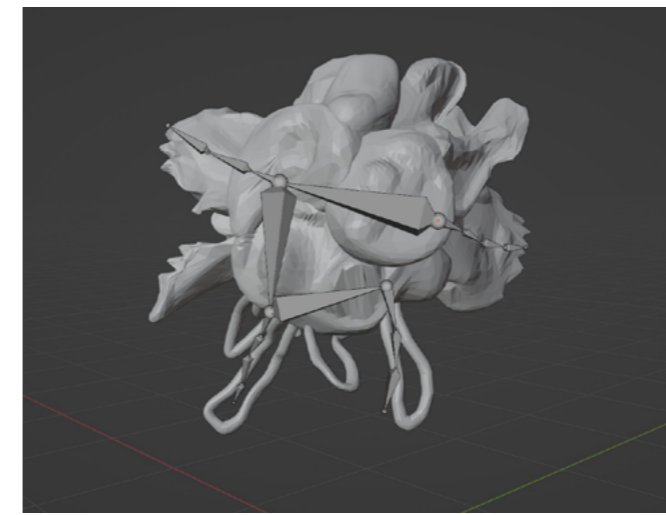
Avatars grounded in object-oriented ontologies present a distinct perspective on the nature of reality and the potency of digital identities. Object-oriented ontologies perceive the world as composed of objects with equal agency, encompassing humans, animals, and inanimate entities. By analyzing the connotations we attribute to our avatars, we can develop a deeper comprehension of the reality we create for them and the manner in which this reality can shape our worldview. This understanding can lead to a more refined appreciation of avatars' influence on individual and social realities.

Experiencing avatars in virtual reality can also uncover connotations that impact our perception of them and ourselves. For instance, while wearing the "hybrid humanoid ornamutations" in virtual reality, the perception of these objects shifted significantly. When observed from a two-dimensional perspective, they appeared weighty; however, in virtual reality, the sense of weight vanished, and they felt hollow and artificial. This change in perception influenced how I regarded both the hybrid humanoid and myself while donning the avatar. It is intriguing to observe how our preconceived notions of objects in the physical world can affect our perceptions of their digital equivalents.

## Ornamutations Avatars

We delved into the concept of hybrid humanoid avatars in the context of the ornamisms project and their integration with the human body. The discussion led us to the idea of creating avatars exclusively using the ornamutation technique, which we have termed ornamutation avatars. The primary objective of the ornamisms project is to seamlessly merge ornamutation with the human body. Designing an avatar using solely ornamutation would forge a direct link between the avatar and the physical body, eliminating the interference of an additional digital humanoid that exists in hybrid humanoid avatars.

To incorporate bones into the ornamutations, I was able to attach them to my limbs in VR. During the avatar creation process, I realized that I was subconsciously seeking structures resembling arms and legs to connect them to my body. It seemed I was instinctively searching for familiar patterns.



Ornamutation Bones

Experiencing the ornamutation avatar was truly eye-opening. Unlike costume avatars or more humanoid avatars, it didn't feel like I was wearing a disguise. The ornamutation seemed like an extension of my own body, and I sensed a more profound connection to it. Before this experiment, I perceived ornamutations as objects or entities employed to modify our bodies or appearances. However, once I assumed the ornamutation avatar, I began to see it as a reflection of myself. This revelation established a connection between my body and this nonhuman entity, blurring the lines between the human and the ornamutation.

This experiment raised numerous questions, and while I don't have all the answers yet, it was a captivating experience to witness myself as a nonhuman. Even though there was initially a sense of disconnection between me and the ornamutation, once I embodied the ornament, it no longer felt alien or threatening. One reason for this sensation was that I had control over the avatar; the ornamutation followed my commands. However, describing it as control might not be entirely accurate, as it genuinely felt like an extension of myself.

Subsequently, I began to ponder the notion of transcending human limitations and embracing a form that is liberated from our physical constraints. There is something incredibly exhilarating about shedding our human form. But is this just the beginning? In a virtual space, what other connections can we forge? For instance, could we create an entire planet where we connect with the ground and become part of an underground ecosystem, instead of merely being an avatar? Is it possible to transcend into non-physical or unattainable states through technology? Can we become air or light? While adhering to humanoid avatars is understandable due to familiarity, it is also constraining. We naturally gravitate towards humanoid avatars because we comprehend these bodies, but what I cherish about this experiment is that I crafted a more liberating entity by stepping away from the human form. Although I could still control limbs, I had no understanding of their significance, function, or purpose.



Ornamutations avatars

In virtual spaces, we have the opportunity to create things that we have never seen or conceived before. In a way, when we use virtual reality, we are already transcending into a new world with limitless possibilities. So, does it make sense to incorporate familiar concepts, such as gender norms or societal structures, into this new space where we can achieve anything we desire? At times, it seems like we impose limitations on ourselves in these spaces. What I am trying to convey is that I enjoy exploring the idea of becoming something beyond human. Before this experiment, I believed that human limitations were facts that we needed to consider when creating in virtual spaces. However, these experiments have shown me that we don't have to confine ourselves, opening up new realms of discovery and self-expression.

Don't misunderstand me; despite controlling nonhuman entities, there remains a substantial influence stemming from my human body. I'm not insinuating that the human body is inherently flawed or something to escape. Rather, I'm intrigued by the prospect of connecting the human body to something different or transcendent. The human body is an incredibly designed organism, but why stop there? We can step into various lives and use our bodies to transcend into something greater. While these ideas might sound like science fiction, they are fascinating and relevant in today's digital age. Why not delve into the possibilities? Could we alter the notion of having a male body to embodying thousands of different forms or even an entire planetary ecosystem? Can we transform our identity into a cloud? Must we confine ourselves to male, female, or familiar identities when defining ourselves? In a virtual space where I am a non-human entity, how would you perceive me if we met in VR? Would I be male, female, or non-binary to you? Do these labels truly matter in this context? The fundamental question is: who or what am I?

This ideology is inspired by Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," (1985). The central concept of the essay is the "cyborg," a hybrid creature that is part human, part machine. Haraway uses the cyborg as a metaphor to challenge rigid boundaries that separate humans from animals, organisms from machines, and the physical from the non-physical. The cyborg represents a blurring of these distinctions, and Haraway argues that embracing this hybridity can help dismantle oppressive structures, including gender binaries and hierarchies.

Haraway claims that modern technology and scientific advancements have led us to a point where humans are already intertwined with machines, whether through prosthetics, digital technology, or biotechnology. This interconnectedness disrupts traditional notions of identity, which were often based on binary oppositions, such as male/female, natural/artificial, and self/other.

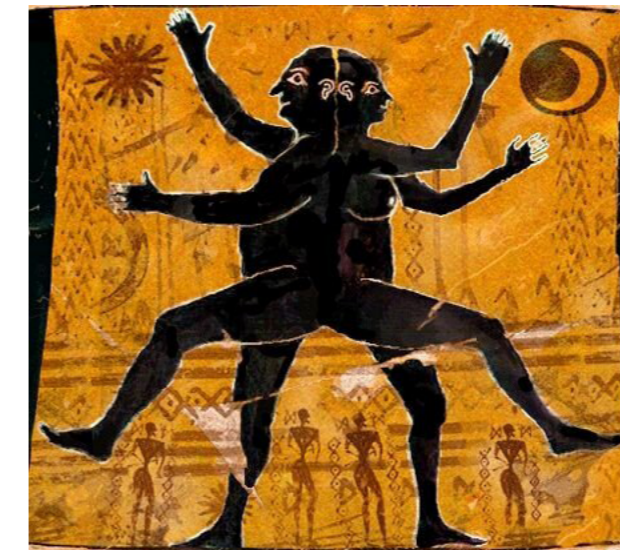
In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway proposes an alternative feminist politics that embraces this hybridity. She argues that by rejecting binary oppositions and embracing the fluidity of identity, feminists can create new alliances and forms of solidarity that move beyond the limitations of traditional identity politics. This approach allows for a more inclusive and diverse feminist movement that is better equipped to challenge systems of oppression.

Moreover, Haraway encourages an ethics of "affinity" rather than "identity." Affinity, in this context, refers to building relationships based on shared goals, interests, and experiences, rather than relying on fixed categories of identity, such as race, gender, or class. This shift in focus enables more effective political coalitions that can work together to challenge dominant power structures.

*"The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world: it has no truck with bisexuality, preoedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense - no 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the West's escalating dominations of abstract individuation, on ultimate self untied at last."* (Haraway, 1989, p. 6)

Reflecting on non-humanoid avatars and engaging in discussions with others, I've come to recognize that their potential for connection shouldn't be restricted to just one human. It can extend beyond that. In fact, Greek mythology already explored the concept of two humans connected as a single entity, as seen in the story of soulmates. Plato wrote (Jowett, 1996), "According to Greek mythology, humans were originally created with four arms, four legs, and a head with two faces. Fearing their power, Zeus split them into two separate parts, condemning them to spend their lives in search of their other halves." As humans, we have evolved and can now transcend back into these two-headed beings, potentially overthrowing Zeus's kingdom once again. While this may sound humorous, is it truly far-fetched?

Creating these avatars allows people to connect with one another in different ways. For instance, envision an avatar that connects different people, enabling them to converse while moving and talking together. The avatar would move in sync with them, allowing the conversation to develop its own identity. In this scenario, identity is not restricted to a single individual. Collectively, we could forge one identity. Some have even proposed connecting our avatars to our pets. What if we linked an avatar to both ourselves and our cat, so that our relationship with our pet took on its own identity? The bond between us and our cat could evolve beyond just a feeling and become a distinct personality in and of itself.



Grecehighdefinition (2020). The Greek Myth of k-myth-of-soulmates

## Translating the Avatars to the Physical World

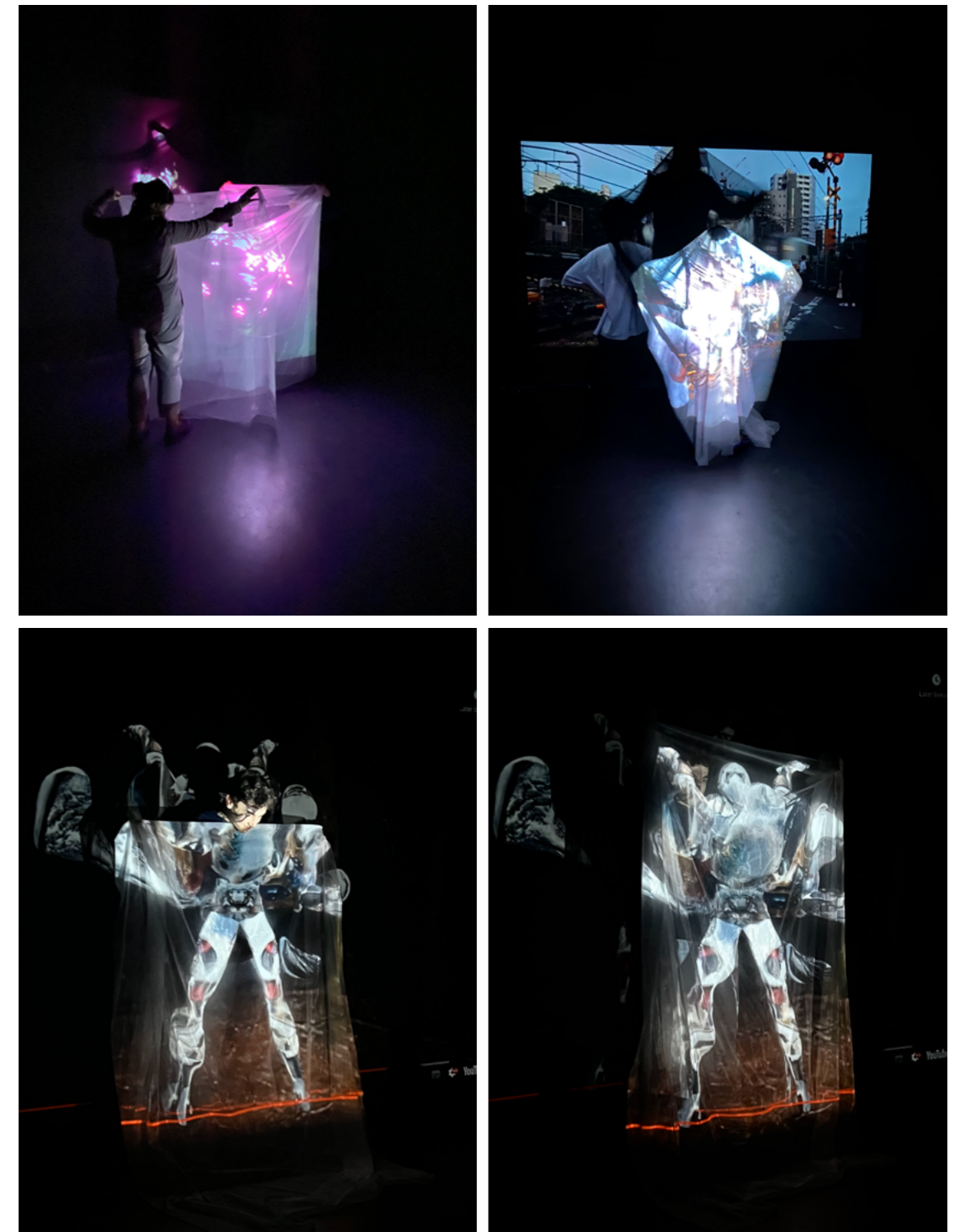
We endeavored to bring avatars into the real world, merging them with our physical bodies. To achieve this, we combined video from the hybrid humanoid avatar and imagery from other avatars, projecting them onto a transparent cloth in a dark room. The transparent cloth created the illusion of a hologram, enabling us to display a broader area without being constrained by the size of our bodies.

Although our goal was to fuse the human body with the avatars, the experience felt more like a dialogue with the avatars rather than embodying them. As the video of the avatar's movements played, everyone moved in harmony, as though participating in a collaborative dance. This further emphasized the sense of conversing with the avatars rather than becoming one with them. I found it peculiar to move along with the avatar, as it felt like I was essentially interacting with myself. The imagery was created when I controlled the avatar in virtual reality, so the movements were familiar. As I danced with the avatar, it was a collaborative experience with my virtual self. This brings us back to the concept of merging one avatar with multiple people. It wasn't an avatar I was embodying, but rather a conversation with my virtual counterpart. As I moved, I reflected on my presence within the avatar. However, I acknowledge the lingering disconnect, given my physical appearance wasn't visible. Furthermore, we danced with the avatar as a group, resulting in a collective performance between myself, the avatar, and those around me. Our movements mirrored the avatar's.

This experiment evokes the ancient cave paintings from 40,000 years ago. Due to low oxygen levels and flickering lights, these paintings appeared to move as they were created deep within caves (Guy, 2021). The artists considered this a highly spiritual environment, connecting them with the other side or the afterlife. In a way, we were attempting something similar—not necessarily with the afterlife, but rather with another realm. Striving to connect two realities, we spent an entire day in a dark room with flickering lights, observing the avatars. This experience felt deeply spiritual. Moreover, the avatars beside me, representing clones of myself in another reality, altered my emotions and associations with them. We found ourselves in a room bridging the gap between the virtual and physical worlds.

As I pondered over the images and videos captured during the experiment, I was struck by the deeply personal interaction between the avatar and me. In one particular image where I stand behind the avatar, I see myself duplicated within a single reality. Although I am observing myself, I perceive the avatar – which was me – as someone else. Is the avatar revealing who I am from another person's perspective? As the avatar stands next to me, I gaze at it, at myself, but I fail to recognize my own reflection. It's only when I concentrate on the avatar's movements that I can truly see myself. The sensation is unlike looking into a mirror, where I tend to fixate on my own appearance since that's all I can see. In this scenario, I observed myself through a warped lens, as though I was witnessing someone else through a unique filter. By examining myself, I shed the preconceived notions I had associated with my identity.

I hadn't anticipated that virtual reality could lead to such an experience, but perhaps it does. By inhabiting a different body (avatar), I subtly detach myself from the issues tied to my physical form. However, when I immerse myself in virtual reality, I still identify with the avatar since I am in control. Yet, if I manipulate a body that bears no resemblance to my own, my physical associations fade away. By assuming a different identity, I become a blank canvas. My physical appearance is intertwined with everything that brings me pride or shame. When I transition into a different body, all these aspects become blurry. My thought processes and personality permeate the avatar, but everything else remains tethered to my physical body. There's no need to carry these negative or even positive associations into a virtual space. By seeing someone else, I can behave like someone else – but that someone else is still me. I'm not pretending to be another person; I'm simply transforming into someone else. This was the sentiment I experienced throughout the experiment. Though I saw another individual, a glimmer of my true self remained, visible only through the filter. It was a reflection of me as an entirely different person.



*(Interview with Soyun Park, Chapter 4: This study bears a resemblance to the “An Experimental Study of a Virtual Reality Counseling Paradigm Using Embodied Self-Dialogue” experiment by Slater, M., S. Neyret, T. Johnston, G. Iruretagoyena, M. Á. d. l. C. Crespo, M. Alabèrnia-Segura, B. Spanlang and G. Feixas (2019). In this investigation, researchers explored the phenomenon where individuals typically provide better advice to others than to themselves when confronted with a personal issue. A prior study demonstrated the feasibility of facilitating internal dialogue in virtual reality (VR) by allowing participants to alternate between two distinct virtual bodies - one representing themselves and the other, Sigmund Freud.*

*By explaining their problem to the virtual Freud and subsequently experiencing the situation from Freud’s embodied perspective, participants could listen to their virtual doppelganger’s explanation and offer advice. By switching between the two avatars, they could sustain a self-dialogue, simulating a conversation between two separate individuals.*

*This research emphasizes the significance of alternating between the participant’s own body and Freud’s virtual representation for achieving positive psychological outcomes. The experiment included 58 participants, with 29 in the body-swapping Self-Conversation condition and the remaining 29 engaging with a scripted Freud character. The results revealed that the Self-Conversation approach led to a higher perception of change and help compared to the scripted interaction.*

*This method is compared to the distancing paradigm, where participants envision solving a problem from either a first or third-person perspective. The study explores the potential of this technique as a self-counseling strategy.)*

# Transcendent Avatars

chapter 2

## Embodiment

How far can an avatar extend beyond the digital realm? While avatars are commonly known for changing one's appearance and entering a different reality, it's not limited to visual avatars in the digital world. In Hinduism, an avatar refers to the incarnation of a deity in human or animal form to counteract evil in the world, with ten appearances of Vishnu, including an incarnation as the Buddha Gautama and Kalkin (Encyclopaedia Britannica). So, with the term "avatar" encompassing a wide range of meanings, we do not fully have an understanding of what an avatar is.

Rather than being limited to the digital realm, I think, avatars can take many forms and exist in various aspects of our lives. Avatars are representations of ourselves, an embodiment of something like clothing, social roles, and tools,... Each of these elements allows us to express different aspects of our identity, enabling us to inhabit various personas and realities. In this sense, our bodies can be considered a gateway that allows us to immerse ourselves in the avatars available to us.

The concept of identity is an essential aspect of human existence that has been present throughout history. And I think that all these identities that we take on could be called avatars, used to express ourselves and connect with others, both in the physical and virtual realms. Whether it's through the clothes we wear or the roles we play in society, avatars play a crucial role in shaping our identity and enabling us to navigate the complexities of the world around us. By understanding the multifaceted nature of avatars, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the role they play in our lives and the power they hold in shaping our sense of self.

But the concept of avatars goes beyond just our appearance. Social roles also play a significant role in shaping our identity and the avatars we embody. By adopting different social roles (avatars), such as parent, teacher, or athlete, we can enter into new realities and explore different aspects of ourselves (Mead 1967). These roles allow us to inhabit different avatars that reflect our unique personalities and experiences.

Even the tools we use can serve as avatars, representing and translating our emotions and intentions. For example, when we pick up a paintbrush, we become a painter. The paintbrush becomes an extension of the painter, allowing them to express their emotions and ideas in a tangible way. In this scenario, the paintbrush itself can be seen as an avatar, embodying the emotions and thoughts of the painter.

The use of different tools in different scenarios can also change the way we embody different avatars. For instance, a chef may feel like a different person when using different kitchen tools, such as a sharp knife versus a whisk. Similarly, a musician may feel like a different person when playing different instruments. The tools we use can affect not only our physical appearance but also our sense of self and identity.

In Marshall McLuhan's "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man," (1964) the term "objects" refers to various types of media, such as television, radio, print, or the internet. McLuhan's main argument is that it is the media themselves (the objects) that have a profound impact on society, rather than the content they carry. According to McLuhan, every medium (or object) has its own unique characteristics that influence how people perceive and interact with the world. These characteristics, in turn, affect the way people think, behave, and organize their societies. McLuhan coins the famous phrase "the medium is the message" to emphasize the idea that the form of the medium itself, rather than the content it conveys, is what truly shapes human experience and culture.

For example, the introduction of the printing press in the 15th century had a transformative effect on society, not because of the specific books it produced, but because it enabled the mass production and distribution of information, which in turn led to significant social, political, and cultural changes.

Similarly, McLuhan argued that the emergence of electronic media, such as television and radio, had a substantial impact on the nature of human communication and social organization, again, not because of the specific content they carried but because of their inherent characteristics as media.

The concept of avatars can extend beyond traditional notions of physical appearance and encompass a wide range of sensory experiences. While tools and physical forms can be considered avatars, it raises the question

It's possible to view our daily experiences as a constant interaction with various avatars. For example, communicating through text with ChatGPT can be seen as embodying an avatar of ourselves, coupled with the AI. The limitless possibilities of avatars are evident when we consider that every interaction we have can be considered a unique embodiment.

*(Interview with Soyun Park, Chapter 4: Soyun discussed how her various identities emerge when she speaks different languages. She becomes a distinct person when speaking English compared to when she speaks Korean. This transformation occurs because the two language systems employ different levels of formality, compelling the individual to adapt their behavior when switching between languages. In this context, languages themselves can be viewed as avatars. Each language represents a unique avatar with its own identity, culture, and history.)*

Expanding the definition of avatars to include intangible qualities is an exciting prospect, as it opens up new avenues for exploring the limits of our experiences. Embodying sound or aroma could allow us to immerse ourselves in different sensory realities, further expanding the possibilities of what it means to embody an avatar and what it means to be human.

Ultimately, connecting the concept of avatars to everything we encounter in our reality can offer us a new perspective on our daily experiences. Recognizing the diversity of avatars we interact with each day, can allow us to appreciate the complexity and richness of our existence, as we constantly embody new and varied expressions of ourselves.



## Embodying Sound

The exploration of avatars and their potential applications has led to different experiments, such as one I recently conducted with Cathérine Verboven. Our experiment aimed to investigate whether embodying sound as an avatar could affect our behavior and movements. We were also curious to discover whether we could alter the sound itself and become one with it.

To carry out the experiment, we placed two sound boxes in front of each other, playing the same frequency of 200 Hz and 1000 Hz. By doing this, the sound waves played on one length, making it easy to hear when the sound waves were moving. Moving in between the soundboxes allowed us to hear the sound changing, indicating our movement and behavior influenced the soundwaves.

As we continued to experiment, we noticed that embodying sound as an avatar had a significant impact on our movements and behavior. We found ourselves swaying and dancing to the rhythm of the sound, feeling as though we had merged with the sound itself. It allowed us to connect with sound on a deep level, becoming one with the audio frequencies.

Our experiment with sound as an avatar took an even more fascinating turn as Catherine and I began dancing together in between the soundwaves. Here, we were not only manipulating the sound but becoming one movement of sound. We found ourselves embodying a collective avatar, where our movements were a direct interpretation of us as sound.

What's particularly interesting about our experiment is the realization that embodying avatars can take on a communal aspect. In this case, the sound became the medium through which we could express our personalities and engage in a shared experience. Despite our different personalities, we moved to the sound we created together, merging into one being.

Our experiment with sound as an avatar highlights the limitless possibilities of avatars, which extend beyond our physical appearance and encompass intangible qualities like sound. It also opens up new avenues for exploring the communal aspect of avatars and how we can come together to create shared experiences. As we continue to push the boundaries of what avatars can encompass, we may find that our understanding of ourselves and our interactions with the world around us will evolve in unprecedented ways.

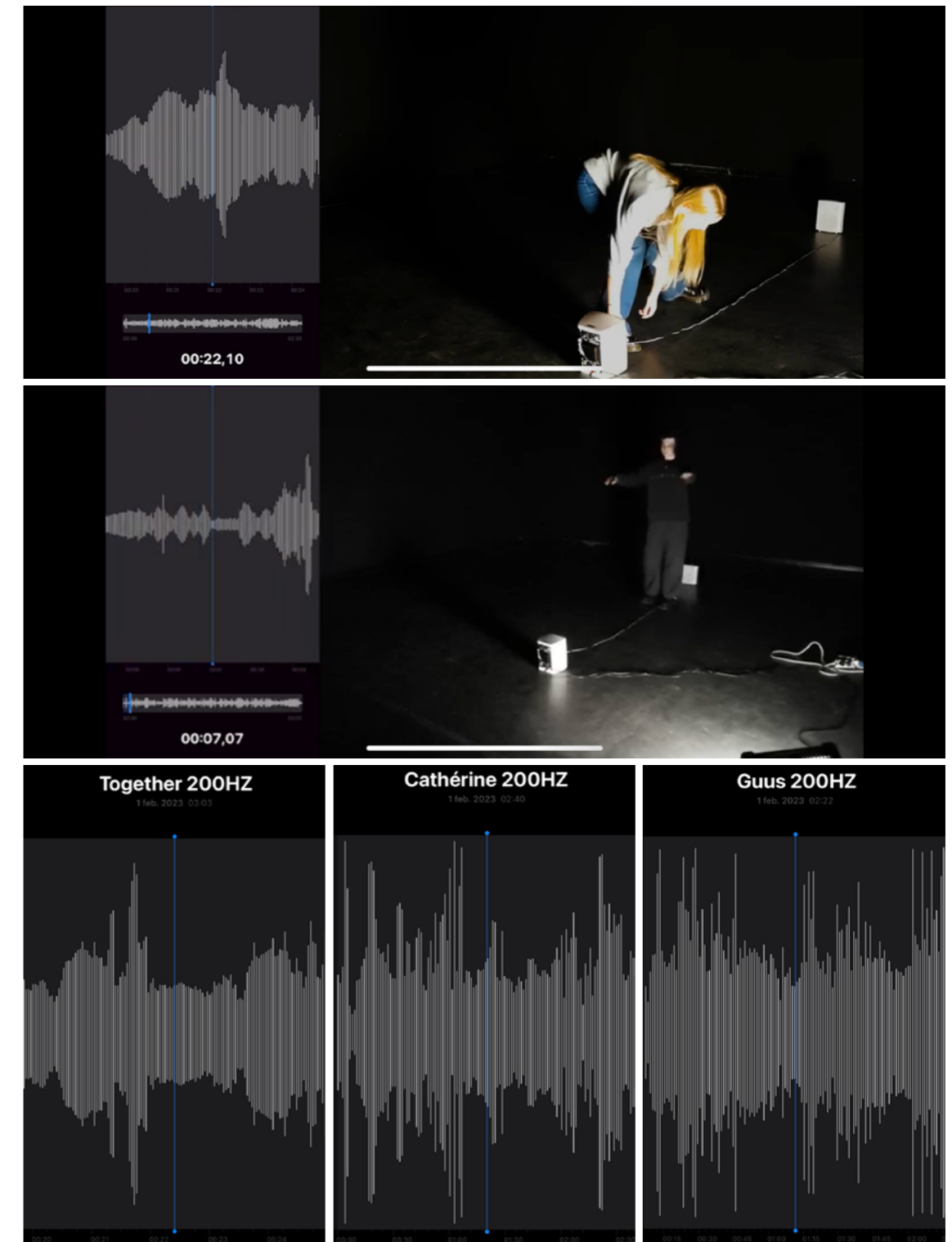
Furthermore, the idea of embodying avatars can be extended beyond our conscious efforts to create them. In our everyday lives, we are constantly surrounded by sound, which can become a part of the collective avatars we embody. For instance, in a typical office environment, the sound of people typing on keyboards, grabbing a cup of coffee, and chatting with one another, all come together to create a unique soundscape. As we immerse ourselves in this environment, we become one with it, sharing the feeling of being a part of it and contributing to its creation.

Similarly, when we find ourselves stuck in traffic, the sound of honking horns, engines revving, and radios playing can all contribute to a collective avatar of frustration and impatience. We become a part of this avatar as we sit in our cars, feeling the frustration and anxiety that comes with being stuck in traffic. By recognizing the avatars we embody through sound, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role our environment plays in our lives and how it shapes our experiences.

*(Interview with Ine Vanoveren, Chapter 4: I asked Ine if she thinks the sound she makes as a flutist could be considered an avatar. Her interesting response was that she sees it more as an extension of herself than an alter ego since she views avatars as alter egos.*

*She believes avatars are there to represent a different identity, while the sound is an extension of her true self. It's a fascinating idea that she sees the sound as part of her personality. Personally, I don't consider avatars as alter egos. I think being in an avatar is similar to playing the flute as she talks about it as an extension of herself. I believe that an avatar is not an alter ego, but rather a representation of one's different identities in a particular situation.)*

## Sound Avatar



## The Self and the Other

The idea of collective avatars and shared experiences also challenges our traditional understanding of identity. We often see identity as a fixed and individualistic concept, but with avatars, we can embody multiple identities and move beyond the constraints of our physical selves. Avatars allow us to explore and experiment with different aspects of ourselves and our surroundings, blurring the boundaries between the self and the other. This can lead to a more open and inclusive approach to identity, where we embrace the diversity of the world and acknowledge our interconnectedness.

Furthermore, the concept of avatars and collective experiences has significant implications for how we interact with technology and each other. By creating digital spaces and avatars that enable us to connect with others in meaningful ways, we can foster a sense of community and belonging that transcends physical distance and differences. This can be especially important in today's world, where social isolation and division are prevalent issues. Avatars provide a unique opportunity to bridge these gaps and bring people together in shared experiences that enrich our lives and enhance our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

In our modern world, we have the ability to connect with others in ways that were previously unimaginable, a phenomenon that Marshall McLuhan famously referred to as 'the global village (1964).' The emergence of digital avatars has given us a unique opportunity to create connections in a virtual space. McLuhan's concept of the global village emphasizes how electronic media, particularly the internet, have broken down geographical barriers and enabled instantaneous communication among people across the globe.

It's not just about physical presence anymore - our identities are fluid and constantly evolving, as we move back and forth between the digital and the physical. This dynamic nature of identity aligns with McLuhan's theories about how media shape our perceptions and experiences, transforming the way we understand ourselves and our relationships with others.

In this digital age, as we become more interconnected through various media, the global village envisioned by Marshall McLuhan continues to expand and evolve. Our virtual interactions and digital avatars contribute to the increasingly complex tapestry of human connection, transcending traditional boundaries and redefining the way we experience reality.

*(Interview with Frank Theys, Chapter 4: During my conversation with Frank, I realized that my viewpoint on virtual identities might not align with how others perceive them or even their understanding of virtual environments. Some individuals may contend that the digital world lacks the authenticity of the physical realm, and virtual avatars do not provide genuine connections. I am not suggesting that Frank held this belief; rather, it was a topic we discussed in the interview, acknowledging that certain people hold this opinion. For example, when discussing virtual reality, there appeared to be a subtle belief that a digital domain is insufficient to be considered a meaningful reality, a sort of illusion. Despite this, I maintain that a virtual world can be just as real as a physical one, drawing upon insights from the book "Reality +" by Australian philosopher David J. Chalmers (2023).*

*Suppose I visit the Eiffel Tower through a virtual reality headset. Have I not experienced the Eiffel Tower in some way? While I may not have been to the actual Eiffel Tower, I have undoubtedly witnessed a representation of it. Although this experience differs from visiting the actual Eiffel Tower, it doesn't make it any less real. Chalmers argues that a flower in a virtual environment serves a different purpose than a flower in a physical environment, yet it still exists and holds a presence in its own reality.*

*According to Chalmers, something is real when it genuinely exists, and this can be measured. For example, physical objects are made of atoms, while virtual objects are created using bits. This means that virtual environments can be measured, and when you're in a virtual space, you are truly experiencing it, not just imagining it.*

*While I acknowledge that virtual reality is an artificial construct, living life through virtual reality doesn't automatically make it unfulfilling. Chalmers compares this to cities, which are also artificial environments created by humans. Despite their artificial nature, many people lead fulfilling lives within cities. As technology advances, virtual and physical realities will become increasingly similar, and there is no reason why people shouldn't be able to create living spaces in virtual environments.*

*The same principle applies to virtual identities. Though they may be artificial, it doesn't negate their authenticity. Chalmers uses the example of money, which is a human invention that holds meaning only because society has agreed on its importance. Similarly, virtual identities gain significance when those embodying them give them purpose and emotional meaning. Consequently, sound avatars can become meaningful if the individuals experiencing them attach significance and genuine emotions to the experience.*

*Interview with Ine Vanoveren, Chapter 4: here Ine Vanoveren also emphasizes the crucial role of the user's willingness to be immersed in a virtual environment. She asserts that if the individual interacting with the virtual world is not open to the idea of becoming fully engaged, it is impossible for the creator or the environment itself to facilitate immersion. It is, therefore, essential for a person to be receptive to the concept in order to truly immerse themselves within the virtual experience.)*

This phenomenon is already evident in the context of collective identities in the physical world. As previously mentioned, consider the example of being stuck in traffic. In this scenario, we collectively attribute the emotion of frustration to the experience, thus imbuing the shared avatar with meaning and significance. When we talk about ourselves, we're not just talking about one person. We're talking about a multi-reality living entity, comprised of a myriad of different parts. We're part of countless groups, networks, and communities, being influenced by different tools, animals, buildings, emotions,.... All of these have different meanings and significance that we assign to them.

It's fascinating to consider the relationship between individuality and collectivism. While each human being is undeniably unique, this very uniqueness is actually embedded within the larger collective of society. It is through being part of this collective that we are able to fully appreciate and celebrate the diversity of the human experience.

In fact, it is impossible to truly understand the complexity of our world without being part of this collective. Even if someone were to deny the influence of the digital world, for example, it would be impossible to escape its impact. In a world where the digital realm is a dominant force, it is simply too pervasive to ignore. The truth is that everything in our world is interconnected, and every individual is a part of this intricate web of relationships and systems.

It's intriguing to think about the concept of our world as an avatar - a larger entity of which we are all a part. In this sense, we are not simply individuals living on a planet, but rather integral components of a much grander whole. Our world, or "avatar," is the sum total of everything that has ever happened on our planet, from the formation of its landmasses to the emergence of life and the countless events that have shaped its history.

This avatar, which we call Earth, is a complex and ever-evolving entity that is influenced by everything within its atmosphere, including ourselves. From the five mass extinctions that have occurred throughout its history to the events of World War II and beyond, everything is interconnected and plays a vital role in the existence and evolution of our planet. By recognizing ourselves as part of this larger avatar, we gain a greater appreciation for the interconnectedness of all things and the profound impact that our actions can have on the world around us. We are not simply isolated individuals, but rather crucial components of a vast and dynamic system that is constantly changing and adapting.

# Human Avatars

chapter 3

## Interconnectedness

In this interconnected world where everything is connected to each other, it may seem as though our individuality is lost. However, to me individuality and interconnectedness coexist, creating a unique and complex human experience. Avatars, as a representation of our various identities, can indeed give rise to self-centeredness and isolation in some instances, but they also provide opportunities to explore our connectedness and the ways in which our actions impact the world around us. This paradox of self-centered identity-driven connectedness is a fascinating aspect of our existence.

As humans, we stand at the intersection of individuality and connectedness, with the capacity to influence and be influenced by the world around us. While the self and the other may be connected, we often operate as if they are distinct entities. However, this distinction is not as clear-cut as it may seem, and our identities are fluid, dynamic, and multifaceted.

We each possess a unique combination of qualities and experiences that contribute to our individuality. However, the question of whether we are individuals or a collective of interconnected beings is both intriguing and complex. We may embody various identities in different contexts, but these identities ultimately converge to form one's sense of self. How we choose to integrate these multiple facets of our identity into a single, cohesive whole is a deeply personal and subjective process.

As we navigate the different spaces and roles we encounter daily, it becomes apparent that our sense of self is fluid and dynamic, rather than a fixed and singular entity. Embracing this perspective allows us to appreciate the multifaceted nature of our identities and to better understand our place in the world. Recognizing that we are not simply a singular individual, but rather a collection of different personas governed by one cognitive system, invites us to reconsider the concept of individuality.

In this context, Richard Rorty's (1989) theory of contingency aligns with this notion of a fluid and evolving identity. Rorty proposed that our identities are shaped and reshaped by various factors, such as our upbringing, social context, and experiences. This absence of an essential or unchanging core to our identities highlights their dynamic nature.

Moreover, Rorty emphasized the importance of narrative and self-creation in identity formation. Individuals craft their identities through the stories they tell themselves and others about who they are and what they value. This process of self-narration offers a degree of freedom and self-determination, as we can choose to emphasize or de-emphasize certain aspects of our lives when constructing our identities.

Connecting Rorty's theory of irony to the idea of a cognitive system running all these different identities offers further insight into our understanding of self. Rorty argued that individuals should adopt an ironic stance towards their own beliefs and identities, recognizing that these are contingent and subject to change. By embracing irony, individuals can maintain a sense of humility and openness, acknowledging that their identities are not fixed or objectively grounded but are rather subject to revision in light of new experiences and insights.

This fusion of ideas highlights the complexity of our identities as being influenced by various factors and subject to continuous evolution. By viewing ourselves as a collection of personas governed by a single cognitive system, we can appreciate the richness and flexibility of our individuality while acknowledging the interplay between our personal narratives, social context, and ironic stance towards our ever-changing sense of self. This interconnectedness reveals how other environments also influence human identity, leading to a sense of human identity disconnecting from itself.

Posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013) offers a valuable perspective on this phenomenon, proposing that identity is not confined to the individual human body or mind but is distributed across multiple networks, systems, and relationships. These connections can include non-human entities, such as animals, artificial intelligences, or ecosystems, as well as our relationships with other humans and social systems. This distributed conception of identity challenges the idea of a unified, autonomous self and encourages us to rethink notions of agency, responsibility, and subjectivity.

As we consider the implications of these interconnected identities, we also confront questions about the ethical implications of new forms of identity and subjectivity. Posthumanism encourages us to consider the rights and responsibilities of non-human agents, such as animals or artificial intelligences, and to rethink our ethical obligations towards the broader ecosystems and networks in which we are embedded.

Integrating the perspectives of both Rorty's theories and posthumanism, we can better understand the complex and evolving nature of identity in our interconnected world. By acknowledging the interplay between personal narratives, social context, and the ironic stance towards our ever-changing sense of self, we can explore the implications of distributed identities and the ethical considerations that arise as our relationships extend beyond the traditional boundaries of human experience.

As I contemplate my existence within the vast interconnectedness of the world, I recognize that I am not a singular entity or being, but rather a dynamic assembly of various personas combined into one. This intricate fusion contributes to the collective, making my existence both diverse and unique. It becomes evident that our personal collectiveness is inherently linked to the greater collective in which we all participate, as the inner adaptability allowing us to assume different identities is connected to the broader interconnectedness we share. This idea of the cognitive system emerged while I was working on different projects with avatars, and I find this theory to be highly reflective in my research. As I delve into various avatars, I engage with different realities and experience diverse scenarios, where I can manipulate my identity to fit each situation. Consequently, these identities are formed to adapt to the circumstances I find myself in. I become influenced by my surroundings and begin creating identities shaped by the greater collective and the world around me. This process underscores the irony of identity that Rorty's theory addresses, as it highlights the absence of a singular, true self.

As I consider the multitude of identities that I create for the avatars, I come to realize that they are all integral components of my cognitive system. Each identity is a unique manifestation, born from the amalgamation of my experiences and environment. These creations not only embody the essence of myself but also hold the power to influence the other identities that I inhabit and will create in the future. The identities of the avatars are as genuine and authentic as the person who is crafting this very text.

Delving deeper into the concept of identity, it becomes evident that each one is a product of the intricate interplay between personal narratives, social context, and the ironic stance that Rorty's theory emphasizes. By weaving the threads of our experiences, values, and beliefs into the fabric of our identities, we engage in a continuous process of self-creation and self-revision. These digital extensions of myself provide a unique lens through which to explore the myriad facets of my being, allowing me to traverse the boundaries between the physical and the virtual, the personal and the collective, and the individual and the interconnected. In this dynamic and ever-expanding landscape of identity, I am not simply one person, but rather a rich tapestry of different selves, woven together by the threads of my experiences, my environment, and my cognitive system.

This mindset prompts us to question whether the world in which we live accurately reflects the multifaceted interconnectedness that defines our existence. Society frequently pushes us into narrowly defined categories, pressuring us to develop our own style or "be ourselves." Yet, what does it truly mean to be oneself or to have a unique style? Are these notions genuine, or are they merely constructs that mask the deeper connections between us all?

Upon closer examination, we find that our individual styles are not entirely our own but rather a blend of our personal experiences and an expression of the collective consciousness we all share. Our styles, preferences, and creations are shaped by the people and world around us, and in turn, our contributions mold the collective. In this sense, your style is my style, and the styles of others are a shared creation. We have all participated in shaping these expressions, and they represent our collective creativity.

The creations we bring into the world are not solely our own, but instead emerge from a collective imagination and collaborative effort. When you create something, it is also a product of my creativity and that of everyone else within our interconnected network. Likewise, the creations of others are shaped by our collective contributions. This perspective doesn't diminish the work of the creator, as the individual most closely involved with the work or style undoubtedly has the most significant impact on the creation. However, it's important to recognize and appreciate the influence that our surroundings and shared experiences have on the creative process.

As we traverse this complex landscape of interconnectedness, it is crucial to acknowledge and embrace the intricacies of our existence. Our individuality is not a standalone phenomenon but rather a dynamic interplay between personal experiences and collective influences. By recognizing that our uniqueness is both a byproduct and a contributor to the greater collective, we can foster a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. This realization encourages us to reevaluate the concept of individuality and delve into the complex web of connections that bind us all together, ultimately enriching our human experience.

In conclusion, our existence within this interconnected world is multifaceted, and we should not be confined to seeing ourselves as isolated individuals. Embracing the complexity of our existence and the interconnectedness we share with others opens up opportunities for growth, understanding, and empathy.

## Me

In the broader context provided earlier, it is essential to acknowledge that our sense of self and individuality stems from a complex and dynamic interplay of personal experiences and collective influences. As previously mentioned, my name is Guus Vandeweerd, but this is only one of many identities I assume across various contexts and online platforms, such as Drunk Rainbow, Guusje, s\_\_\_uug on Instagram and many more. These different names represent distinct personas connected as one, each with unique characteristics and mannerisms. In a sense, these identities also embody the collective influences that have shaped me. Additionally, there are unnamed identities, such as the person lying in bed or the individual sitting on a bus, which also contribute to the named identities I recognize as myself. These unnamed identities play a subtle yet meaningful role in shaping and enriching the spectrum of the identities I call by name.

As Guus Vandeweerd, I am influenced by both the physical and digital worlds. The digital realm, in particular, has a significant impact on my identity as Drunk Rainbow. However, when I assume this persona, I do not speak or behave as I would as Guus Vandeweerd. Are these alter egos or distinct facets of a singular identity? Regardless, these various personas coexist and influence one another, shaping my overall sense of self (the cognitive system running all my identities).

My identity also takes on different roles and meanings in the lives of others. I am a child to my mother, a friend to my peers, and an unknown person to strangers. These diverse relationships contribute to my multifaceted identity, illustrating the complex nature of human existence.

In the realm of gaming, I have embodied various avatars, each contributing to my identity in different ways. In Minecraft, I became a cunning veteran who builds exquisite houses, if i say so myself, and in League of Legends, I connected deeply with the character Luxana Crownguard. Lux is more than just a character to me; she is a friend and an extension of myself. These virtual personas, along with the various roles I assume in other gaming scenarios, further demonstrate the intricate web of personal experiences and collective influences that shape my identity. When my friends interact with me in these games, they perceive me through the lens of these characters, blending Lux's personality with my own. Similarly, in this paper, my personality and that of ChatGPT are interwoven.

The concept of virtual identities is also gaining traction in the entertainment industry, particularly in streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube. In 2020, Vtubers, who are individuals streaming content while using a virtual avatar, usually a 2D anime character, became a popular trend. It's important to briefly discuss this phenomenon, as one Vtuber, Ironmouse, stands out as particularly intriguing. With just over 1.5 million followers on Twitch, Ironmouse has quickly gained popularity.

Vtubers rarely reveal their actual faces, so we primarily get to know their personalities through their avatars. Interestingly, Ironmouse suffers from Common Variable Immunodeficiency (CVID), which can make everyday tasks like leaving the house or even getting out of bed extremely challenging. Often, when individuals have a chronic disease, it becomes part of their identity. However, by using a virtual avatar to portray her personality, Ironmouse's illness does not become a central aspect of her online persona. In some ways, this may offer a sense of normalcy by allowing her to momentarily escape her chronic condition. It is essential to note that this is speculative, as I have not had a conversation with her to confirm this perspective.



Screengrab via Ironmouse on Twitch (2023)

Nevertheless, Ironmouse's audience does not associate illness with her virtual identity. While we cannot see Ironmouse's physical identity, does that mean we don't know the real Ironmouse? I don't believe so. I think we become familiar with a specific aspect of her personality, the one she consistently displays during her streams. (Guus, 2022, p7)

*(Interview with Ine Vanoeveren, Chapter 4: Ine also discussed her connection to Ironmouse's story. Despite dealing with illness, Ine believes that the digital environment offers a form of escape, to an extent. She doesn't want to abandon her physical body, as she acknowledges its capabilities, but the virtual world presents a reality where her challenges are no longer prevalent. This unique aspect of digital spaces provides her with a sense of disconnect from her health concerns.)*

This example also demonstrates how others might perceive someone through their virtual identities, much like how my friends might see me. While I'm not suggesting that I have a chronic disease or comparing myself directly to Ironmouse, her case serves as an excellent illustration of how a virtual identity can conceal one's physical identity without obscuring their core essence or personality.

As I entered my twenties, I confronted the inevitable question of what direction to take in life. I chose to pursue graphic design, adopting the persona of a creative individual. This embodiment of creativity, however, is influenced by those who came before me, and in a way, I am channeling their creative spirit. In my journey, I have collaborated with and been inspired by researchers like Anneleen Swillen and Ine Vanoeveren. Their influence has ignited a desire within me to explore research as well.

The encounters with these identities and others that inspire me prompt me to question if I am, in some way, attempting to embody this entity called a "researcher". Am I observing these people and striving to become like them? Do I aspire to incorporate their qualities and achievements into my own identity? In this process, I am forging a new identity to integrate into my cognitive system—an identity that merges my sense of self with that of a researcher. Am I once again blending my identity through an avatar (the researcher), further expanding the boundaries of my self-perception?

When exploring my identity within the context of collectiveness, it becomes clear that fully understanding oneself is an insurmountable task. Our sense of self is a fluid construct, shaped by a multitude of identities that we embody and the ever-changing experiences and influences that we encounter. As individuals, we may develop a unique style or specific taste over time, but we can never predict how we will respond to situations we've never experienced before.

Our understanding of our identity is limited to the collective influences that shape us, and we cannot fully comprehend each individual aspect that makes up our sense of self. Our identity will always be influenced by the world we create around us, as it is impossible to construct an identity without such context. We require a foundation upon which to build and develop our sense of self, which inevitably intertwines with our surroundings. This realization invites us to redefine the concept of individuality and explore the diverse facets of our identity that contribute to the greater interconnectedness of the human experience.

## Do you wanna be my ....?

The project "Do you wanna be my friend?" emerged as an exploration of the emotional experience when others embody the individual's closest to us and those we interact with daily. Drawing inspiration from the South Korean documentary "Meeting You (2020)," the project aimed to investigate the potential applications of technology beyond gaming. One poignant scene captured my attention, where a grieving mother was virtually reunited with her deceased daughter, who had passed away due to a blood-related disease.

The profound emotional connection between the mother and the virtual being representing her daughter ignited my curiosity about the nature of humanity and identity. In a way, the daughter was resurrected, challenging the conventional understanding of death, and it prompted questions about the virtual entity's identity within the collective consciousness. The virtual being served as a visual clone of the daughter and incorporated AI-generated aspects of her personality. Notably, the mother recognized her child, indicating that an emotional connection still existed.

Imagine a scenario where a loved one suddenly passes away but is immediately replaced by a flawless digital clone with whom you can interact just as you did with the actual person. Can we truly say that the person has died? From their perspective, their life has come to an end, but for those close to them, it appears as though they continue to exist, achieving a form of digital immortality.



MBClife (2020). *Virtual Reality, Real Grief*. slate.

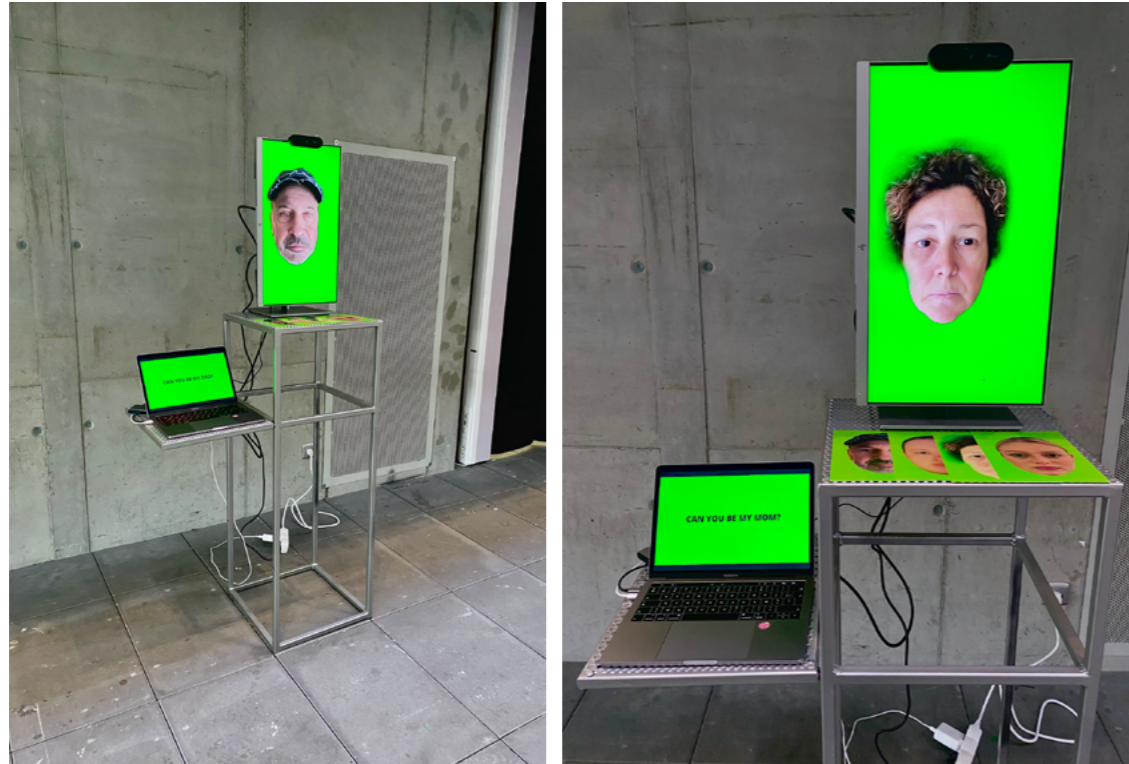
Of course, current technology cannot completely replace the person in their entirety. Those close to the deceased will still yearn to witness the person grow and change alongside them. However, as technology advances, these possibilities may become a reality, profoundly altering our relationship with death itself. The girl in the documentary serves as a ghostly representation of the actual girl, much like how at the moment of writing this paper Google Maps is a ghost of the city Kyiv, or the ghostly Facebook accounts of deceased individuals. These digital echoes challenge our understanding of identity, presence, and the boundaries between life and death. But we are actively trying to make these technologies reality. Programs like Alexa are implementing software that can record a person's voice, allowing them to narrate bedtime stories to your children. This technology could be used to preserve the voices of deceased loved ones, allowing them to continue engaging with future generations (Vincent, 2022).

Sci-fi and fantasy movies have long pushed the narrative of achieving immortality, and we are now beginning to mimic this desire. Whether this is good or bad is irrelevant, as it is already happening. We are striving to achieve immortality in the realities of others.

When considering the child from the documentary, she represents more than just a deceased child. To me, she is both the child of the mother and a virtual clone. I do not separate the two entities because they are presented in a way that naturally connects them. The child's personality transcends the physical and becomes a digital clone that achieves a form of immortality. This raises complex questions about the very nature of humanity.

For the mother, her child was momentarily back, standing before her. She knew it wasn't the real child, but she experienced an emotional reaction towards the clone – a reaction reserved for someone deeply connected to her. This poignant moment illuminates the blurred lines between reality and death, challenging our understanding of identity and humanity in a rapidly advancing technological world.

In my project, I created filters that represented the faces of people close to me, controllable through a camera and facial recognition software. These filters were displayed in various settings, and the interactions people had with them fascinated me. The participants saw the filters as faces of strangers, while I recognized them as people I knew. This created a paradox in which my perception of the interactions was influenced by my familiarity with the individuals represented by the filters, whereas the participants only saw the visual representations of unknown identities and imposed their own stereotypes onto them.



Interestingly, the experiment brought to light the prevalence of gender roles. When embodying my mother's avatar, many participants assumed the persona of a sweet housewife, adopting a soft, gentle voice reminiscent of a 1960s mother. Conversely, my father's avatar was often portrayed as strong, masculine, and dominant with short, concise answers. Of course, not all participants followed these stereotypes, which revealed insights into the individuals controlling the avatars. I gained a better understanding of the participants as they reflected their own experiences onto the avatars, showcasing their personal realities and complex ideas of identity.

In my own upbringing, my mother was the head of the household, and my father was unfamiliar with tasks like laundry and ironing. This highlighted how we, as humans, attempt to make sense of our reality by imposing restrictive categories on individuals, trying to fit our multifaceted identities into singular, simplistic boxes. The participants in my project projected a shallow, one-dimensional version of the identity they attributed to each avatar.

Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble" (1990) argues that gender is a social construct, with humans striving to maintain divisions between genders. Elements like blue and pink, dresses, dominance, and submissiveness are all enforced identity constructs placed upon us. My research is rooted in the notion of not knowing who I am and not identifying with the identities presented to me, emphasizing the issue of gender division, as I believe my generation experienced an extreme form of gender categorization. In my childhood, something as simple as ordering a Happy Meal at McDonald's required stating one's gender, and the division between genders in toy stores was staggering. The separation of boys and girls into distinct worlds was pervasive.

It is a vital topic in contemporary society, and the experiment revealed how deeply ingrained gender norms are within our collective consciousness. The project's outcomes demonstrate the importance of addressing and challenging these norms, as they continue to shape our understanding of identity and the complexities of human experience. This division influences how we construct identities for ourselves and others, often leading to distorted perceptions clouded by gender norms.

As I discuss the cognitive system that hosts thousands of diverse identities to create our sense of self, I believe that the two traditional gender norms are insufficient to represent us as humans. I don't see myself fitting into the categories of man, woman, or even non-binary. Instead, I perceive myself as a cognitive system running multiple identities simultaneously.

If I were to choose a label, "genderfluid" seems most fitting. Genderfluid individuals experience their gender identity as dynamic, changing over time or between situations, and not confined to any single gender identity (Hines, 2018, p10). I hesitate to call myself non-binary because I find it difficult to develop an identity that isn't connected to the gender norms imposed upon me during childhood. Although my upbringing was quite gender-neutral—I played with both Barbies and wore princess dresses, as well as toy cars and video games not typically considered "for girls"—the presence of gender was always evident. As society perceives certain activities and toys as either "for boys" or "for girls," I embodied the essence of the respective gender while engaging with these various toys.

In conclusion, the project "Do you wanna be my friend?" delves into the complexities of identity and humanity in an ever-evolving technological landscape. The powerful emotional connection demonstrated in the documentary "Meeting You (2020)" and the virtual interactions explored through my project highlight how our understanding of identity is continually challenged by the blurring boundaries between the physical and digital realms. As technology advances, the potential to achieve a form of digital immortality pushes us to reconsider the nature of life, death, and human experience.

Moreover, the project emphasizes the prevalence of gender roles and societal expectations that shape our understanding of identity. The experiment with avatars revealed how deeply ingrained these norms are within our collective consciousness, and it is crucial to address and challenge them as they continue to influence our perceptions of ourselves and others.

The concept of the cognitive system hosting a multitude of identities and the fluidity of gender further underscores the inadequacy of traditional gender norms in representing the complexity of human experience. Instead, we must embrace a broader understanding of identity that recognizes the dynamic and ever-changing nature of our existence. By acknowledging and exploring these complexities, we can gain a deeper insight into the multifaceted nature of identity and humanity in the context of our rapidly advancing technological world.

# Interviews

chapter 4



## Interviews

For the final project for this research, I collaborated with Anneleen Swillen to engage in a conversation with three diverse artists. The objective was to gain a deeper understanding of how various individuals perceive virtual identity and avatars, as well as to explore artists' perspectives on the concept of embodying something or someone else.

This project not only showcases my research perspectives but also highlights the influences that have shaped my own opinions on the subject. Writing this paper with ChatGPT represents a unique fusion of two collectives into one, drawing on the knowledge and insights from numerous individuals that have inspired me, such as Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and many more. This work serves as an embodiment of these diverse identities merged into a singular adaptation of myself and ChatGPT.

The artist interviews exemplify the interconnectedness I aim to convey through this paper. By engaging with these individuals, we can better appreciate how their perspectives have informed and enriched the contents of this paper. Furthermore, these conversations allow us to delve deeper into the complexities of virtual identities and avatars, providing a platform for exploring the impact of technology on our understanding of self and the world around us.

In these discussions, we delved into topics such as the fluidity of identity, the role of technology in shaping our perceptions, and the potential for avatars to challenge societal norms and expectations. Each artist brought their unique experiences and viewpoints to the table. The artist interviews serve as an excellent representation of the interconnectedness that permeates the exploration of virtual identity and avatars. By engaging with these individuals and incorporating their perspectives into my research, I can better appreciate the multifaceted nature of this subject.

## Soyun Park

The first conversation we had was with interdisciplinary artist, designer, and educator, Soyun Park. Originally hailing from South Korea, Soyun now resides in The Hague, The Netherlands, where she continues to create thought-provoking and innovative art. She is a founder of RGBdog, a community-based studio that seeks to bridge the gap between technology and the world around us.

Soyun's work explores a wide range of aspects related to technology, including its historical, emotional, literary, and societal dimensions. Her projects often involve collaborations that take the form of videos, installations, and audiovisual performances, experimenting with new media and technology in order to examine the connections and gaps between the digital RGB world and our everyday reality.

Having showcased her talent at numerous prestigious events and venues, such as Rewire Festival, Nederland Fotomuseum, Ars Electronica, CTM Festival, Jeonju International Film Festival, and iii workspace, Soyun Park is a true visionary in her field.



## Frank Theys

The next interview is with Belgian filmmaker and visual artist Frank Theys, born in 1963 in Uccle, has garnered international recognition with his work featured in prestigious institutions like the MOMA in New York and SMAK Ghent. His most notable project, "TechnoCalyps" (2006), is a three-part documentary series that delves into transhumanism, exploring advancements in genetics, brain research, artificial intelligence, bionics, and nanotechnology.

In "TechnoCalyps," Theys examines the scientific, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions of transhumanism, engaging with renowned experts such as Marvin Minsky, Ray Kurzweil, and the Dalai Lama. The documentary has been praised for its innovative approach, seamlessly blending the creative vision of an artist with the critical eye of a documentarian. Frank Theys' work offers a compelling look into the future of humanity and technology.



## Ine Vanoveren

Introducing Ine Vanoveren, a distinguished Belgian flutist and Doctor of Musical Arts specializing in contemporary music and XR-performance. Completing her doctoral studies at the University of California, San Diego, Ine has enjoyed an international solo career and frequently collaborates with renowned ensembles.

Ine is an educator and researcher, teaching contemporary music at the Liege Conservatory of Liège and shares her expertise as a guest speaker at international universities. As an artistic researcher in XR-performances and a researcher in Creative AI-applications for real-time performance, Ine Vanoveren stays at the cutting edge of innovation in the arts, making significant contributions to the world of music and digital arts.



# Conclusion

chapter 5

This research journey began with an exploration of avatars and the projection of identities in digital spaces, but it has evolved into a much deeper investigation into the complexities of human identity itself. As we engage with digital spaces and avatars, we create connections and realities informed by our offline experiences and interactions. This interconnectedness not only challenges our traditional understanding of identity but also highlights the fluid and adaptable nature of who we are as individuals and as a species.

The research process revealed that our identities are not singular, static entities, but rather dynamic cognitive systems governed by countless individual components working in harmony. Avatars exemplify this fluidity, serving as manifestations of our diverse selves in various situations. As we navigate through life, our relationships, professional endeavors, personal interests, and cultural backgrounds all contribute to the ever-changing mosaic of our sense of self. Avatars, as digital embodiments of our identities, allow us to explore these aspects in novel and often surprising ways, offering a means of self-discovery and self-expression.

We exist within a vast web of interconnectedness, continuously influencing and being influenced by one another. Avatars serve as a powerful reminder that we can assume multiple identities, which should not be dismissed as mere alter egos but acknowledged as manifestations of our diverse selves in various situations. Our understanding of identity ought to be fluid and adaptable, perpetually evolving in response to our day-to-day experiences, environments, and stages of life. The cognitive system mentioned earlier echoes Rorty's irony theory, where individuals adopt an ironic stance towards their beliefs and identities, recognizing their contingency and potential for change. By embracing irony, we can maintain a sense of humility and openness, acknowledging that our identities are neither fixed nor objectively grounded but are, instead, subject to revision based on new experiences and insights. (Rorty, 1989)

The concept of the avatar can be closely related to Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg—a hybrid entity that is part human and part machine. Haraway's theory highlights the avatar as a being that transcends traditional stereotypes and societal constraints. The cyborg serves as a powerful metaphor to challenge the rigid boundaries that separate humans from animals, organisms from machines, and the physical from the non-physical. It signifies the blurring of these distinctions and suggests that embracing this hybridity can aid in dismantling oppressive structures, including gender binaries and hierarchies (Haraway, 1991).

Avatars, much like Haraway's cyborg, raise important questions about the social structures of the world we inhabit. Are our current societal norms conducive to the expression and realization of our multifaceted identities, or are they stifling the potential for us to fully embrace and understand the complexities of our true selves?

Moreover, avatars can also be seen as a reflective tool, allowing us to view ourselves from a different perspective and engage in situations that may be unfamiliar to our cognitive systems (Slater, M., Neyret, S., Johnston, T. et al, 2019). By adopting an avatar, we can explore new contexts and experiences, which can serve as a valuable learning tool to better understand who we are and how we would react in various situations.

In this way, avatars not only challenge societal norms and expectations but also provide us with opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery, ultimately helping us to better comprehend the intricacies of our identities and the world around us.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed to this paper. As this work represents a unique fusion of my own experiences and the collective insights of ChatGPT, it also serves as an embodiment of the ideologies and actions I have absorbed from all the individuals I have had the privilege of working with. This collaboration was crucial for me, as it allowed me to explore the intersection of various identities, enriching my understanding of the multifaceted nature of selfhood. Ultimately, this paper serves as an avatar of my interpretation of our collective experiences, wisdom, and growth.

The concept of the avatar extends beyond a mere physical entity, illustrating the interconnectedness that exists among all of us. As each reader engages with this paper, they imbue the paper's identity with new meaning and purpose, contributing to a collective avatar. This shared avatar transcends the individual, reflecting the confluence of diverse perspectives and experiences that enrich our understanding of identity and our place within the larger web of interconnectedness.

Through conducting this research to gain a deeper understanding of myself, I've learned more than I anticipated. I've come to realize that I am not a singular entity but rather a cognitive system with multiple identities, and my identity transcends a single gender. I embody various personas throughout my existence and daily life. If I must apply a label, I now identify as genderfluid, a realization that emerged from this very paper.

As I mentioned earlier, I may never fully understand myself, and I may never know who I truly am—but I'm at peace with that. In fact, I'm even excited by the prospect that this process has no definitive endpoint, and my explorations of self will continue to surprise me until my time comes to an end. Or will it? Perhaps I'll be reincarnated as a digital clone, and my digital counterpart can carry on the pursuit of understanding my/our identity.

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# The Avatar and the Self

## Phenomenology of my Digital Double

Avatars act as enthralling channels for venturing into alternative realities and characters, surpassing our everyday limits while preserving a link to our authentic core. By delving into these personas, we start to ponder the essence of being and the fluid nature of identity itself. Avatars not only expand our sense of self but also provoke us to address its adaptability. Consequently, we engage in an intricate interplay between self and other, obscuring the boundaries that separate them.

In my dissertation, I carried out several case studies to comprehend avatars and obtain a deeper understanding of individual identity. These investigations introduced diverse theories, leading me to doubt the very existence of identity. This posthuman inquiry explores the notion of identity within and extending beyond the digital sphere.