Dimensions Of Identity

2009

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DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

Imagination and fantasy environments created by writers and artists have always drawn people into their worlds. Advances in technology have blurred the lines between reality and imagination. My interest has always been to question the validity of these worlds and their cultures and to transcend the evolving virtual dimension by fusing it with what we perceive to be reality.
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INTRODUCTION

What makes us connect to a piece of art? What makes us understand it? The artist can tell us his or her intentions and others can analyze them, but why not live inside their work as if it were real? Imagine if one could experience and explore a Picasso from the inside. What if Van Gogh had a blog read by millions? How would this have affected their work and how we perceive it? These are just a few of the questions I ask myself as a cybercitizen.

Every piece of art is an experience, a glimpse into the mind and world of the artist - his dimension, his life, his culture. Virtual media has made it more possible than ever to connect an artist to the viewer on a massive scale and to a diverse audience. Our physical experience with art is no longer limited to simply visiting a museum or having to find a book. An image can be transmitted all over the world in seconds or a performance broadcast live via web feeds and be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. An entire culture is evolving over the web and not just one but many different cultures and subcultures emerging from a plethora of interests. It is inevitable for new types of artists to emerge from this new society. As always, they will use the tools available to them in their world and in their language. They will create new ways to express themselves, reflect their traditions, and make statements about their current condition. Evolving technology begets an evolution in art.
BACKGROUND

My exposure to the virtual environment began in high school where online chat rooms exposed me to simming, a text based role-playing game. Having had very little experience with video games or computers prior to that, the foundation of my interest for web-based socialization and gaming began there. I was a member of a Star Trek online simming group for four years. I had my own circle of online friends whom I had never met physically and whose real names I did not know. To my surprise, in a lot of ways, I felt closer to them and found them easier to talk to than people I knew in real life.

While in college, I pursued a Bachelor’s degree in Digital Media and Animation, and I was introduced to the world of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG). Dark Age of Camelot was my first attempt at engaging in this type of three-dimensional role-playing universe. As a video game novice, the mechanics of this medieval fantasy-based game were hard for me to completely grasp. I did not play very long, but the experience lingered in my mind and had a dramatic effect on me.

Star Wars Galaxies was released in June of 2003 and drew me back into the MMORPG world. As an avid Star Wars fan, relating to this world was easier than Dark Age of Camelot. The story and world from the movies came to life, and I was free to explore it via my computer in a very personal way. I started playing from beta and as full of bugs and imperfections as it was, I instantly fell into with the world it offered. Already having an established interest in the storyline, I came to understand how the mechanics of this type of game worked. There was so much to do, and I soon became obsessed with acquiring game experience to advance my virtual alter ego. When role-playing my way through my Star Trek simming days, there was an intense connection with my characters in that world, but this adventure was different; she was an
extension of me. I had a visual of the fantasy environment I lived in and could customize the experience by involving myself as much or as little as I wanted.

*Star Wars Galaxies*’ character customization options allowed me to personalize my online avatar to make it feel like my own. Nothing satisfied me more than hopping onto my speeder-bike in-game and roaming around to explore the virtual world I lived in, a world that only cost me $14.99 a month, much cheaper than real-life traveling. As a student feeling confined to the university with financial limitations, this was very appealing. My first character was an entertainer class, which allowed me to get to know people in the game who played other class types and helped me to understand how the MMORPG world worked. My time playing *Dark Age of Camelot* did not offer that dimension the way *Star Wars Galaxies* did.

Although the roots of my gaming interest originally began with socializing in a fantasy world, it turned into an opportunity to experience things that real life limited. The environments themselves turned into an inspiration for worlds I hoped to one day create with my developing animation skills. As a result, my standards were set high for the games in which I wanted to become involved in. Beauty, customization, and realism of the world and characters became as important to me as the content and communication systems within the game.

After playing *Star Wars Galaxies* for a couple of years, I moved on to sample other MMORPGs as they were released. None took my interest again until *EverQuest2*. Released in 2005, it lured in players who longed for the days of *Dark Age of Camelot*, were unsatisfied by the beta of *World of Warcraft*, and players of the first *EverQuest* who desired better graphics or something new. The original *EverQuest* set the standard for today’s MMORPGs. Having been inspired by text based games called *Multi User Dungeons* or MUD, it provided a visual to the worlds created with the MUD software that were similar to the *Choose Your Own Adventure*
books from the 1980s and early 1990s. In MUD games, players would type in slash commands to interact with each other in a completely text-based format. MMORPGs have made this format obsolete, and user interfaces paired with simple keyboard commands have become the primary way to interact within these worlds. These slash command systems are still a passive element in current MMORPGs but are not necessary to play. Currently, most people are only familiar with a few social commands, such as “/wave” or “/bow,” because this queues a social animation from your character for role-playing purposes.

The new world of *EverQuest2* was not as vast as *Star Wars Galaxies*, but cloth and hair animation had improved significantly, such as moving when the character did. Environments were also littered with particle effects and bump mapped textures that gave the illusion of depth. Male and female figures had more gender distinguishing characteristics. Female characters particularly had a more curvaceous figure rather than simply being an androgynous shape with breasts.

When I had advanced as far as regular content could take me, I decided for the first time in my short gaming life that participating in *hardcore end-game content* with a guild of players who could kill the most difficult mobs in the game would take me to the next stage. I applied to and joined the top guild on my server. This experience altered my view of the game by seeing how serious these players were about their guild, characters, and play styles. There were many aspects of this culture that I quickly embraced. Logging into the game became an important part of my day. This was more than something people did just for fun.
EVOLUTION OF WORK

Space Culture

Having a strong interest in space culture, I used my 3D animation skills to produce a few environments with the aim of challenging the viewers to second guess themselves as to whether an image was real or a virtual illusion.

![Image of The Blockhouse](image)

**Figure 1: Space Culture Series, The Blockhouse, 2006**

The environments created were ones that only existed in the past, and the only references I had were old images and blueprints. Using these resources, I created The Blockhouse from the 1960s blockhouse used in the Mercury space missions with John Glenn. This was part of a project that extended from my undergraduate work on a joint venture called Shadows of
Canaveral. The real blockhouse had been gutted and only the run-down exterior remained. Using blueprints and old photos, it was brought to life again in 3D. The end result was a very pristine-looking, almost alien environment - it seemed too perfect. Others who looked at the rendered images of it questioned whether the image was a real photo or a 3D environment. Instead of “dirtying” the space to make it look used and more realistic, I concluded that this was the reaction I wanted. In an attempt to make it more challenging to tell the difference, I paired my work with real-world images of space culture to reinforce the virtual. I wanted to challenge people to think about how they thought and looked at reality. Some of the images were ones I had photographed at Kennedy Space Center; others were ones appropriated from copyright-free NASA photos.

Figure 2: Space Culture Series, KSC-89PC-1338, reprinted 2006 (NASA copyright-free)
Figure 3: Space Culture Series: *Engines*, 2006

Figure 4: Space Culture Series, *Tables*, 2006
Figure 5: Space Culture Series, *KSC-92PC-2023*, reprinted 2006 (NASA copyright-free)

Figure 6: Space Culture Series, *KSC-89P-850*, reprinted 2006 (NASA copyright-free)
The second environment in this series was a 1950s photography darkroom also built from a few photos and my imagination, using similar methods of presentation by pairing them with real images. Although this series was interesting to create and the ideas formed from it heavily influence my current work, the content was not something I was truly passionate about. It was for this reason this would be the last part of the series.

Figure 7: Space Culture Series, *Dark Room 2, 2007*
Peruvian Culture and Fantasy Environments

My tendency to get caught up in technical aspects, obsessive planning, and seeking perfection held me back from being creative and inhibited my production in the space culture series. Needing to use a more spontaneous medium to get clearer results, I settled on using a camera and sought an out-of-the-ordinary subject or environment. Looking inward for inspiration, I decided to travel to my country of birth, Peru. Not having been there in seventeen years, it seemed like the best place to learn more about myself.

I spent five weeks traveling the country and experienced it from both the perspective of a tourist and a foreign native. Even though I grew up in the United States, there were traditions in my family that were clearly Peruvian, yet there was an extreme contrast between my cultural heritage and the American one to which I was accustomed. Recognizing that multiple cultures can simultaneously exist in one person made me think about the formation of a personal culture. I did not have to constrain myself to a single cultural label, helping me realize and accept a lot of things about myself.

Peruvians are a proud people with a rich history. They are extremely superstitious and heavily influenced by Catholicism and their Andean ancestors. In the United States, Native Americans and their culture were nearly eradicated, but in Peru, indigenous traditions are still deeply integrated into every aspect of life. Although the influence of Spain is very evident, the internal and external conflict continues between the Western and Andean world, existing most strongly in religion, politics, economics, and cultural prejudices. This made me wonder how two seemingly integrated cultures could appear so much in conflict with one another and how this might inhibit a country’s progression.

After my trip, the feeling of being torn between two worlds was very strong. There was a
strong desire to learn more about my country, but sadness lingered within me regarding its condition. Several images I took in Peru reflected that and had a similar theme as my space culture series - connecting past culture with current culture. This correlation strengthened my thoughts about what was real versus illusion. Compared to the United States, the world I experienced in Peru seemed so distant and foreign, often harboring a powerful sense of realism even though the environments there were outside of my comfort zone. What made the harshness of human life there more real than the comforts of my American culture? The feelings of duality were very intense within me.

Figure 8: Peru, Rojo y Blanco, 2007
Figure 9: Peru, Oro y Cajamarca, 2007
Figure 10: Peru, Chiclayo, 2007
Figure 11: Peru, Islas Uros, 2007
When I returned home, my initial intention was to build in 3D some of the fantastic architecture I saw in Peru, such as the Chan-Chan ruins. However, I began getting caught up in the images themselves by making mental comparisons to environments I had been exposed to in video games. For example, the sand dunes in Huacachina reminded me of the *Sinking Sands* in *EverQuest2* and *Tatooine* in *Star Wars Galaxies*. This made me strongly consider the purpose of creating online environments when similar ones already existed. Experiencing these natural and architectural wonders in the physical dimension made me appreciate them much more, but in some ways the virtual felt like an alternative to travel. It was as though I had already been to Huacachina, because in some ways, I had already played in very similar virtual environments. Even though the environments in a game are an illusion, they still tend to reflect the attributes of real places, or at least echo the qualities of different cultures. The more I thought about this, the more it dawned on me that I was also part of a third culture: the Internet.
Figure 12: Study comparison.
Above: photo of Huacachina sand dunes and an oasis in Peru
Below: *EverQuest*2 in-game screenshot of an oasis in Sinking Sands zone.
Screenshoting and Photography

I began documenting my MMORPG experience when playing *Star Wars Galaxies* using screen captures of the game, more commonly called *screenshots*. This is an already established in-game tool. By pushing one button, the software automatically saves a still image to a designated folder. This gave me the ability to revisit the places I had traveled to in-game and not have to actually be in the game. New levels or accomplishments, taking pictures of other players, and having a visual record of something unique and interesting were all among the reasons for me to screenshot.

When I moved on to *EverQuest2*, I began to document my experiences again, using the same “snapshot” approach as in *Star Wars Galaxies*. My first character had over 2,000 screenshots taken in under four months. At the time, I worked at a photo lab and made a habit of saving these images to CD and printing them out just as anyone would do for their regular photos. The similarities of the real-world photos to the screenshot ones were becoming more evident to me. Screenshots became like my own brand of photography, but the association with fine art had not occurred to me yet, and so I explored other ways to express myself before it would evolve into that.
Figure 13: *Star Wars Galaxies, Screenshot 0093, 2003*
Figure 14: *Star Wars Galaxies, Screenshot 0108, 2003*
Figure 15: Star Wars Galaxies, Screenshot 0294, 2003
Figure 16: City of Heroes, Taja 01, 2004

Figure 17: City of Heroes, Taja 02, 2004
Figure 18: EverQuest2, Thiravia_Screenshot 0493, 2008
Figure 19: *EverQuest2, Thiravia_Screenshot 0827, 2008*
Figure 20: EverQuest2, Taja_Screenshot 0658, 2008

Figure 21: EverQuest2, Taja_Screenshot 0265, 2007

Figure 22: EverQuest2, Taja_Screenshot 0008, 2006
Figure 23: Warhammer Online, Taja^F_066, 2008
Figure 24: Warhammer Online, Taja^F_016, 2008
The connection between screenshotting and art struck me when I saw the work of Hasan Elahi. Much like the purpose of my video game screenshots, he documents every aspect of his life to expose the condition of being a Bangladeshi-born American in a post-9/11 world. This caught my attention because it made me realize that the content of a single image did not have to be complex in order to make a statement as long as it is channeled in a clear direction.

**Virtual "Happenings"**

Being able to justify screenshots as photography was only the first step in coming to terms with the immense potential of how gaming culture bears many parallels to real-world expression. My further immersion into the hardcore raiding environment reinforced the fact that every action within the game was something which could be transformed into art. Traveling to a distant land was no longer necessary for me to be able to create work; everything I needed was in front of me. Making arrangements with my online friends and guildmates, I recorded and photographed their characters. Many were very open to the idea, and I proceeded with the knowledge that this was equivalent to portraiture, performance art, and even fashion in the real world. This went beyond photography. "Logging in" or starting up a video game could be comparable to stepping onto the stage of a theater. One assumes the role of fighter, healer, scout, bard, or any other class that is offered within the world he or she chooses to be a part of. Everyone works together to accomplish a shared goal just as actors do in their performances. As my guildmates and I prepared to battle each monster, I made mental references to the *Happenings* art movement in the late 1950s and thought about how raiding was not so different from that. The art space was virtual instead of physical. Attendees were human beings scattered around the globe instead of localized participants and onlookers in crowded cities gathered in the real world. Just as with the artists in the 1950s, there were planned elements; we all had the same
in-game goal: to kill the same virtual monster, but how it happened and other aspects were improvised. We would kill the same monster every week, but no two raids were ever the same. Occasionally, crowds would form within the game to watch us take down a difficult monster in their world.

The virtual environment I used in my screenshots was not one I had created, but the art and theories of Marcel Duchamp and Richard Prince had paved the way for reappropriation long before me. Actions and decisions made by players in a game are entirely up to them as long as it falls within the constraints of the software coding. Even though I was appropriating the virtual architecture and character models, the choices I made in appearance, armor, and actions were all mine and those of my subjects. It was no different than photographing a person in a real-world environment wearing clothing that the photographer did not create. In essence, we were all co-inhabitants of a virtual environment with both real humans and programmed robots in virtual bodies. A world that was only accessible through my own robot: my computer.
Figure 25: *EverQuest2, Raiding Shard of Fear, 2007*

Figure 26: Detail of *EverQuest2, Raiding Shard of Fear*
Figure 27: EverQuest2, Raiding Avatar of Mischief, 2007

Figure 28: Detail of EverQuest2, Raiding Avatar of Mischief
Figure 29: *EverQuest2, Defiler Mythical Quest, 2008*

Figure 30: Detail of *EverQuest2, Defiler Mythical Quest*
VIRTUAL MULTICULTURALISM

“Cyberspace has become an increasingly populated universe, a rapidly evolving civilization with its own history, politics, heroes, villains, legends and lore that is not so much parallel to the real world as an increasingly present aspect of it.” Shannon McRae, ‘Coming Apart at the Seams: Sex, Text and the Virtual Body’

How do we know each other? Define a friend? Is it possible to know someone in real life and have no idea who they really are? Is there some sort of comfort that comes with having seen a person's face in the real world? Are not all types of interaction a form of role-play?

What is Culture?

Culture can be defined as "the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought." The developing global societies evolving over the Internet cannot be ignored because they have become an extension of our own world.

Second-Life, developed by Linden Lab, launched in 2003. It is a community-driven virtual planet Earth similar to the MMORPG but removes the restrictions and the distinct objectives that other games give the player. Residents can purchase property and create their own buildings, objects, and textures. It is this freedom that has attracted various types of nontraditional players.

Although companies have tapped into using billboard-like advertisements within games before, they are now are paying attention to the potential of going beyond websites by expanding themselves into Second Life’s free-form environment that simulates physical presence. Universities, educational communities, and governments are creating virtual three-dimensional
extensions. Maldives was the first country to establish an embassy within *Second Life* followed by Sweden, Estonia, Colombia, Serbia, Macedonia, Philippines, Albania, and Israel. Gallerist Haydn Shaughnessy and his wife, Roos Demol, run an art gallery called Ten-Cubed in *Second Life* that was designed by real-world architect Benn Dunkley. Their first exhibition, *Crossing the Void II*, debuted featuring work available as *Second Life* editions from five artists working with modern technologies. Numerous concerts featuring famous singers such as U2 have also left their mark on this unique social environment. The University of Kansas purchased sixteen virtual acres as an extension of their real-world art department to “combine performing and visual arts in real life and cyberspace” (KU News Release). Students around the world can attend classes on *Art Island* online. It features a performing arts center, a lecture hall, open air studios, film production area, and interactive galleries of student works. *Art Island* also highlights a student-run extension of their real-world Red Door Gallery. The university’s art department plans on hosting its first online International Convergent Media Festival in April of 2009. These examples of establishing virtual territory go beyond the definition of a traditional online presence.

Mimicking capitalism, *Second Life* features a monetary system based on supply and demand where users can earn money and use it purchase goods or services from other players. What makes this system unique is that the game’s Linden dollars can be converted into real-world currency through the game. In 2006, the *Second Life* community welcomed their first virtual/real-world millionaire, Anhse Chung (real name: Ailin Graef). She invested in virtual real estate and profited in real-life from selling properties to real-world companies as well as started her own in-game corporation that develops three-dimensional environments for outside sources.

*Second Life* is the best virtual-world example of a game that can affect real life because what constitutes reality is becoming dramatically refigured by virtual existence. Every game and
online social network can be seen as a miniature business or civilization that can either succeed or fail just as it would in real life.

**Virtual Identity and Shapeshifting**

Who people are in real life is restricted by their community, society, and the roles they play. Worker, mother, father, sibling, gender, and even their names all characterize the roles within their own identity. Among the many things that define and classify how those roles should be played and the responsibilities that come with them are television, media, tradition, friends, and families. As a result, fixed identity becomes a performance, and the quality of the performance is rated accordingly by those around, who may or may not share in the same role.

To some degree, a human being can modify his or her body but is limited to genetic predispositions and the concrete environment where he or she evolved and developed. Until technology can transcend the boundary of the real world and imagination, the virtual world is the only place where one can shapeshift an identity into what he or she wants. Gender, race, and other roles have become verbs rather than nouns. For example, a man assuming the role of a virtual woman is analogous to an activity like biking or running, merely something he does, rather than being a part of who he is. The Internet blurs these fixed identities and limitations. They are converted into a position to occupy in the virtual community rather than fixed roles. Individuals who feel trapped by their real-life circumstances can overcome psychological feelings of inferiority or social pressures to construct new selves by assuming or creating new virtual roles through social interaction.

In most types of gaming, one chooses a predefined role established by the developers of the software. There are certain classes or roles that are usually more desirable than others within each game. The choice a player makes throws him or her into the ranks of every other player
who has previously played that archetype. A healer class, for example, is expected to restore hit points or the health of other players. A fighter class is assigned the role of distraction because he has the innate ability to take hits from virtual creatures or mobs better than the other archetypes, whereas a mage class can usually inflict the most damage but can be killed easily if a mob comes into close contact. Each class has clearly defined strengths and weaknesses, just as predefined real-world roles do.

In MMORPG communities, there are famous players for every class whom the newer players, newbies, either look up to or dislike, just as real-world people do towards celebrities and authority figures. Fame is determined by how well one plays and what groups he or she become involved with. Responsibilities of these new associations as well as the desire to maintain in-game status can become an addiction. Ironically, this echoes reality; players could be seeking to escape their real-life roles and commitments but can end up trapped by their new in-game ones which may appear to be more lucrative.

When does an online friend become a real friend? Online friendships can be very vague. I have been a part of many online groups but can honestly say only a few of those friendships have crossed over into the real world. Typically when a person leaves an online community or decides to quit a game, they sever ties with whomever they associated. Usually the ones who continue communicating outside of that singular environment which brought the two individuals together are the ones who develop real-life friendships, even though the two have never met outside the Internet. Individuals can often become blinded by this and be very affected by the disappearance of another player.

Online gaming communities can also be used to keep in touch with friends and family who are far away. Groups of real-world friends often get together to "hang out" in a game to
overcome distance. Gaming couples also take advantage of this opportunity to spend time together with their virtual avatars like they would on a date in real life.

Another way that roles are being redefined is with traditionally perceived roles of male and female. The gender boundary is broken as many real-life males play female characters. Some males may pose as females because they are generally treated better in video games or simply because they would rather look at a woman’s body on the screen rather than a man's. A homosexual male or female may choose to play an avatar of or with characteristics of the opposite sex because they feel a closer association to it. The acceptance of this practice can cause confusion with online relationships and has, from my experience, caused most players to assume that every player is male until otherwise proven to be female through other means of verification such as voice chat or webcam. I have also encountered that many real-life females primarily play their own gender, as they are inclined to feel a more personal connection with their characters than men do. Most first-person shooter, or FPS, games do not offer female avatars, thus population of women is scarce. Women who are drawn to play male avatars may do so to compensate for something lacking in their own lives or desire to project dominance. A female who is playing a fighter class, for example, may feel the need to create a male character to ensure that other players in the group take her seriously. The idea that certain archetypes are more suited to certain genders shows that even in a virtual environment stereotypes cannot be easily overcome even if it is a virtual illusion.

Robbie Cooper, a photojournalist, pairs photos of real-life players with their online gaming avatars in his artwork. It is interesting to see how similar the real-world person and the avatar can be, though they may not be the same gender or species.
Figure 31: Eun-Sol Lee/Ryang Hui, Photograph by Robbie Cooper, 2007

Figure 32: Choi Seang Rak/Uroo Ahs, Photograph by Robbie Cooper, 2007
MY DIMENSION

Challenging Reality

My work has always been intended to blur the lines between virtual and physical. At least for the time being, neither can exist without the other, since our society has become so dependent on technology. Upon entering the online world, I have always had multiple identities. This is distinctly different from multiple personalities because I am the same person, only assuming different names and appearances. Just as the performance artist Orlan transforms her body with the means offered in the real world, that of plastic surgery and cosmetics, my virtual self morphs within the parameters of the gaming software. Orlan takes on characteristics of women in famous paintings while I take on the virtual body of mythological and fictional beings, such as elves, aliens, and superheroes.

The work by Nikki S. Lee in *Projects 1997-2001* heavily influences my ideas about multiple identities and virtual shapeshifting. Can the different roles I have played in games not translate into the idea that each game type is its own subculture? My online identity, Taja, has been a Bajoran Starfleet tactical officer in *Star Trek*, a Twi'lek Teräs Käsi master/bioengineer in *Star Wars Galaxies*, a Human blademaster in *Dark Age of Camelot*, an electric blaster class superhero in *City of Heroes*, a Wood Elf druid in *EverQuest2*, and the latest incarnation, a Witch Elf in *Warhammer Online*. In every game, I am my real-life self, but at the same time the virtual me shifts into an appearance and role just as Lee shifts herself between real-world subcultures.

Recently, I found the need to expand my online identity into a second persona called Thiravia. Her only developed manifestation at this time is as a bard in *EverQuest2*. There have been other names I have assumed, but these are the only two that I have felt an intense
connection with. Sometimes identities can have a life of their own, and sometimes they can be just a name and nothing more. A person may like being or playing a certain role more than others. After a while, it sticks to one's real-life self and becomes a part of him or her. The names Taja and Thiravia are as much mine as the names given to me at birth.

**Self-Portraits and Mixed Reality**

My current ongoing series entitled *Virtual Shapeshifting*, revolves around these two identities, Taja and Thiravia. The works are a documentation of my experiences in my two most recent games, *EverQuest2* and *Warhammer Online*. Intended as self-portraits, these avatars are reflections of me. In every game, I choose all aspects of their appearance and clothing within the parameters of the software.

In this physical dimension, it is not always possible to comprehend everything that happens in other cultures, and understanding the motives of these societies is even more difficult without being fully immersed in their world for an extended period of time. This, however, does not mean that we cannot appreciate foreign artwork or art from unfamiliar subcultures. A viewer with a background different from the artist can acknowledge and appreciate the variations from his or her own culture, simply seeing a piece for its common elements. There will always be boundaries between a foreigner's and a native's interpretation of a specific work; the perceived value will always differ. Universal pieces exist which have a range of interpretations that vary among cultures and time periods. My art is no different from this. In order to understand the world in which so many other players and I exist, the audience need not fully understand every social aspect of the game but simply be able to acknowledge the connections that exist between the physical and virtual.
Figure 33: Virtual Shapeshifting: *Taja, Warhammer Online*, 2008
Figure 34: Virtual Shapeshifting: Taja, *EverQuest 2*, 2009
Figure 35: Virtual Shapeshifting: *Thiravia, Warhammer Online*, 2009
By putting my game characters into real-world environments, the viewer gets a sense of unity between the two worlds and may not realize that he or she is looking at a real environment, although the character is clearly not real.
Figure 37: Virtual Shapeshifting: Alice IRL, 2008

The transparent arrow and ground circle are selection indicators in the game and imply the puppet-like state of my physical body bound by the controls of the user interface. Overlaying the in-game elements onto a real-world image illustrates the relationship between the physical self and the virtual strings which identify and control a character. This also reflects the influence technology can have on the real world and how it can invade physical space.
Figure 38: Virtual Shapeshifting: *Self-Portrait 1*, 2009
Figure 39: Virtual Shapeshifting: *Self-Portrait 2*, 2009
By merging my physical and my in-game selves into one character, I emphasize that my online identity and my real identity are essentially the same. In figures 38 and 40, I have used my physical body as the model and blended my character’s face and features onto my own. Figure 39 uses the opposite technique, in which my character’s body and my physical face are blended.
Figure 41: Virtual Shapeshifting: *Identity: Taja*, 2009
As a contrast to figures 38-40, these two pieces emphasize the difference in appearance between the three versions of me rather than melding them together. The visible pixels along the character’s rough edges versus the clearer image of my physical appearance also evoke thought about the differences between realities: such as, what are the basic elements which make up the virtual world compared to the molecules and cellular structures of the physical world?
The connection between reality and virtual socialization can be seen in the mirrored pairs of real and in-game gestures.
CONCLUSION

Reality and virtual reality still have a long way to go before they become truly cohesive. In time, users, technology, and media will ultimately determine how soon and how completely the two worlds will meld. My art and research reflects the influence of the Internet and gaming cultures while challenging traditional perceptions of reality.
GLOSSARY

Avatar: used to refer to an online visual representation of a player

Bugs: errors within a video game that affect game play

Bump map: a 2D image applied to a 3D surface to give it the illusion of being more complex

Class: the type of profession a player chooses in a video game

End-game content: content designed to keep players in the game once they reach the maximum level

Guild: a group of players who band together in friendship or for a common goal, like a club

Guildmate, Guildie: a fellow guild member

Hardcore: dedicated or serious players; also used as a modifier for other words to make them seem more intense

Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG): online type of role-playing video game where players can interact with other players in real time

Mobs: creatures or non-player characters within a game designed to be killed by players

Newbie, Newb, n00bs: players who are new to a game; also used to describe players who make mistakes typical of new players

Raid: a large group or conjoined groups of players who band together to kill mobs that are very difficult in a game

Raiding: the act of participating in a raid

Slash commands: in-game commands that begin with a / which queue up actions

Simming: text-based role-playing game that occurs in a chat room or thru e-mail
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