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STYLISATION OF VIRTUAL CHARACTERS IN DIGITAL GAMES

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Abstract

The study aims to clarify various ways virtual characters are stylised in digital games. The author works with the basic assumption that the appearance of avatars is formed in accordance with individual preferences of players, and that the consumers of digital games prefer to construct their virtual avatars as idealised versions of themselves. However, one question is yet to be answered – whether the manners in which players of digital games visually stylise their avatars reflect the hedonistic elements of socio-cultural and media reality that are related to the cult of beauty and perfect body. The study defines the key terms associated with the analysed issue. The author pays special attention to game mechanics as means of interaction between the players and the digital game environments, especially to the game mechanics based on 'serious' entertainment, which are the only ones able to describe the simulative character of digital games in detail. As the author believes, simulation seen as imitation of real life is applicable to the process of constructing the looks of virtual game avatars. The study is based on the terminology of Media Studies, Ludology, Theory of Digital Games, Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology. The questions of stylisation of virtual characters appearing in digital games are reflected on via logical thought processes that are applied on purpose, in order to offer a thorough discourse analysis on the given topic.

Keywords: archetype, cult, Proteus effect, stereotyping, myth

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, trying to find the means of expression, which differentiate digital games from other types of media and explain their transmedia nature, has become the core point of Ludology, i.e. Game Studies. The study of the American designers K. Salen and E. Zimmerman [1] titled *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* refers to F. A. Beach's words about determining the means of expression typical for the digital games environment. According to the authors, (digital) games are meant to release and eliminate redundant energy; they constitute a communication space dominated by the expressions of universal enthusiasm; they typically manifest libido, sexuality, aggression or the players' anxieties, simulating other people's lives.

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Digital games are also intertwined with desire, curiosity and experimentation, and therefore function as tools of socialisation, self-expression, but also abuse. The simulative nature of digital games is also discussed by A. Sarkeesian. The author's research aims to merge new Feminist Philosophy and Game Studies, reflecting on various examples of the ways the means of expression in digital game environments work, mostly in the context of presentation of women in digital games. A. Sarkeesian predominantly focuses on the 'damsel in distress' archetype which presents female game characters as less important and less skilled than male heroes. Women appearing in digital games are often seen as helpless, naïve or innocent persons that need to be saved [A. Sarkeesian, *Damsel in Distress (Part 1) Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, http://www.feministfrequency.com/2013/03/damsel-in-distress-part-1/]. The 'damsel' archetype is used very frequently (e.g. in digital games featuring princesses such as *Princess Toadstool*, *Princess Peach* or *Princess Zelda*).

The aforementioned 'damsel' archetype is in sharp contrast with the 'bombshell' archetype that is also used quite often in the digital game environments. The term 'bombshell' refers to a physically attractive, sexually desirable and sensuous woman [2]. Many female characters introduced in mainstream digital games are portrayed as heroines with hypersexualised physique (quite obviously, *Lara Croft*, *Xena – Warrior Princess*, *Sophitia*, *Sara Bryant* and other fictitious female characters belong to this category). Any attempts to achieve such type of femininity are closely associated with the social process forcing women to change their bodies in accordance with the idealised images of feminine beauty. The myth of beauty and the cult of body therefore represent our visions of being young, sexually attractive and happy, while being old or even elderly is, in fact, perceived as ugliness. However, the question of understanding 'ideal proportions' in relation to digital games needs to be discussed within wider contexts, not just in terms of Feminist Philosophy. Given this fact, we also take into consideration the perspectives of Media Studies, Ludology, Theory of Digital Games, Psychology or Sociology. To do so, we use publications and studies written by M. Sicat, C. Bateman, R. Boone, E. Aboujaoude, M.D. Dickey and J. Schell as the primary sources of information.

As we have mentioned above, our study's purpose is to clarify the influence of human desires, ideas, preferences or media-driven 'patterns of beauty' on the individual ways virtual game characters (avatars) are stylised. We believe that the physical appearance of avatars in digital games often results from individual preferences of players who favour the possibility of constructing idealised versions of their own bodies and faces. Looking into one of the basic spheres of research on digital games – game mechanics and their functioning – allows us to find out more about whether the player of digital games truly chooses her/his game avatar's appearance in accordance with the hedonist elements of socio-cultural and media reality that are bound to the cult of beauty and perfect body (so-called 'Proteus effect'). However, defining the basic terminological axis of the given issue, i.e. the terms related to game mechanics meant for 'serious entertainment', which are the only ones able to precisely

describe the simulative character of digital games in terms of constructing the physical appearance of game avatars, is also highly important.

The existing body of related scholarly literature and the theoretical reflection on the discussed problem help us fulfil the study's main objective. Furthermore, we apply the relevant methods of logical textual analysis – the use of analysis, synthesis, comparison and inductive and deductive methods is, of course, intentional, as we aim to provide an overview of the ways players create their virtual game avatars' physical appearance.

2. Defining the theoretical outlines – game mechanics and their classification

At present, late modern Game Studies focus on defining the means of expression used in digital games, especially in terms of Theory of Digital Games. Digital Games Theory sees digital games as cultural artefacts, as a part of media production and the gaming industry (or rather the entertainment industry). Three primary areas of interest are important here – *games* (what kinds of digital games the players favour, and why) [3, 4], *players* (the people who play digital games) [5, 6], and *game mechanics, gameplay* (the ways these people play digital games). Given the study's scope and purpose, we are, most of all, interested in the latter sphere – *game mechanics*, one of the key fields of today's digital games research.

M. Sicart's scholarly article titled *Defining Game Mechanics* sees the term 'game mechanics' in the light of digital games analysis, paying attention to their formal elements predominantly. The text refers to the key scholarly texts published by the digital games theorists J. Juul and E. Aarseth or R. Rouse, the renowned digital games designer. Considering their opinions on the given matter, M. Sicart claims that 'game mechanics' represent the methods facilitating the interactions between the players and the virtual worlds of digital games. The author points out that even this definition cannot be seen as final and universally valid, because technological and game design-related innovations will continue to shape the digital games industry, along with its products (digital games). Generally, game mechanics are actually specific *functions* (key bindings, e.g. pressing 'W' on the keyboard typically means that we are able to move the avatar forward), related *actions* (pressing the given key allows us to actually move the avatar forward) and following *reactions* (by going forward, the avatar is able to overcome an obstacle, proceed to the next level, etc.) [M. Sicart, *Defining Game Mechanics in Game Studies*, http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart]. Taking into account the principles in question, we may state that game mechanics represent the ways digital games function (we perform action X which results in achieving or obtaining Y). If the action X is performed properly, we are able to achieve/obtain the desired Y. This also means that any kind of manipulation with the virtual (physical) identity of the player of digital games is possible only on basis of using proper game mechanics.

In order to determine the categorical apparatus of game mechanics, we work with the theoretical outlines offered by various digital games theorists, e.g. C. Bateman, R. Boone [7], E. Aboujaoude [8], M.D. Dickey [9] and J. Schell [10]. The following identification and short description of selected game mechanics aims to underline their influence on the creation of socio-cultural reality, virtual reality and, most importantly, the player's virtual identity.

Hard-fun mechanics or *core mechanics* can be defined as a basic gaming system, as a set of actions that are necessary for a digital game to function. The player creates her/his own virtual world by using them. They determine *place* and *space* where the game occurs (the player creates and edits the 'game field'); the selection of *objects, characters* and related *attributes* (the player is able to choose from a varied offer of diverse attributes that are to be manipulated within the game); *actions* (the player reacts to individual possibilities the game offers); *rules* and how to stick to them (the player gets acquainted with the given rules associated with *space, movements, objects, actions, consequences* and *limits*) and *abilities* and *competences* application (the player employs her/his physical, mental and social competences in order to play the game).

Inner mechanics or *metadata* are basic gaming activities that are given a new set of semiotic meanings. To explain this principle, we use the digital game series *Super Mario* (*Nintendo*, 1985–2015) as a suitable example. The core mechanics of this game are based on 'avoiding' (various obstacles). The function of 'jumping' is very important here, as it is used to overcome diverse barriers or roadblocks. However, the avatar of Mario does not have to just jump over obstacles, at least not exclusively; the player may choose to jump an enemy, causing his death. Killing enemies is therefore seen as a hidden activity (meta-activity) which gives the function of 'jumping' a new semiotic meaning. Inner mechanics thus enrich digital games with a wide spectrum of additional activities to perform. They may even become one of the most basic motivators of playing the game in the first place, especially in case of highly interactive digital games.

Satellite mechanics aim to provide special elements that are supposed to improve or expand the already existing set of activities. By applying various *updates*, game designers tend to add new functions or expand the existing ones. Adding a telescope or a silencer to an existing game mechanics (a firearm) would be an appropriate example of such configurational changes. Another example of enriching a digital game by configurational game mechanics is re-programming or rather any unauthorised modification of the game's source code (so-called *hacking*). This activity alters the basic game code through exploiting various software deficiencies and imperfections. We might mention, for instance, the highly controversial website *www.sexy-sims.com* which allows the players to re-programme the otherwise neuter bodies of avatars included in the digital game series *The Sims* (*Maxis*, 2000-2015). The configurational game mechanics also involve *cheating* (re-configuration of a game in order to simplify its course or make it more attractive through various changes in *activities* or

functions based on specific codes). These codes are often published in official game magazines or constructed by the game's designers themselves.

People-fun mechanics, *object-oriented mechanics* and *interacted mechanics* are interactive elements focused on establishing and strengthening audience relations. These include in-game communication activities between two or more players (chats, private lobbies) or communication activities related to the game and its systems occurring elsewhere (official discussion forums, fan-made websites, etc.). Interactivity, communication and human competitiveness are exceptionally powerful game mechanics. We may even say that the object-oriented mechanics influence, at least to a certain extent, the ways virtual reality of a specific game is constructed.

Easy-fun mechanics or *simple mechanics* follow the concept of 'light' entertainment, raising the extent of interactivity and inspiring the player's curiosity. The given type of mechanics offers various ways of playing, followed by appropriate feedback. Easy-fun mechanics encourage the player to try a specific activity and witness its consequences. The game mechanics based on 'light' entertainment are typically included in digital games requiring imagination and various interactions, i.e. life simulators and role-playing games. Using 'light' entertainment in terms of the given genres strengthens the player's feeling of freedom – she/he feels freer to construct the game's virtual reality and own virtual identity.

Serious-fun mechanics allow the player to create diverse, variable simulations; simulation seen as mimicking of real life is also applicable to the process of forming the player's virtual physical identity. Serious-fun mechanics give the player an opportunity to construct an avatar in accordance with her/his cultural preferences, values, aesthetic ideals or other gaming-related intentions. It is also very popular to create virtual 'replicas' of famous actors or other celebrities. However, we have to bear in mind that the ways virtual characters are stylised via the appropriate game mechanics based on 'serious' entertainment are always conditioned by the possibilities offered by a specific game genre. Serious-fun mechanics are further discussed in the following chapter of the article.

3. Serious-fun game mechanics as a tool for stylisation of game avatars' appearance

Considering the serious-fun game mechanics based on simulation and human fantasy, we state that players of digital games tend to create their virtual counterparts in accordance with three basic sets of character traits. The first set of characteristic traits **'copies' the player's features**. Whether we talk about visual appearance (e.g. eye colour, type of figure) or inner characteristics (e.g. personality traits, temper, values), created avatars resemble their 'makers' in any possible way. Creating such an avatar is not uncommon; game mechanics of simulation-based digital games and especially digital role-playing games tend to offer complex character editors to give the players an opportunity to build up

simulated 'doppelgangers' (e.g. *The Sims, Eve Online*). Moreover, the ways the players choose their avatars' complexion and overall looks are partly influenced by these players' true nationality and ethnicity. Similar findings proving this premise are present in empirical research conducted by Y.B. Kafai, M.S. Cook and D.A. Fields [11] in 2010. The results suggest that the combination of virtual and 'real' identity establishes a represented image, an avatar which, in many ways and significantly, 'copies' the ethnic traits of its 'maker'. In other words, it is much more likely that an African-American player will create an avatar of the same complexion than an avatar with Caucasian features.

However, there are cases when characteristic traits of game avatars **do not correspond with the players' features and personalities**. Such an avatar is thus just a 'puppet' in which the player does not 'reside'; it exists only to allow the player to engage in the gaming activities. This kind of interaction is called *doll-play*. Some digital games offer pre-defined appearances of the avatars they include, so the player is not required to edit these avatars in any way (e.g. the pre-defined and, most of all, iconic physical appearance of *Lara Croft*). Additionally, the player may sometimes create a brand new appearance of a virtual avatar that is not dependent (or rather based) on her/his real visage. These cases include formation of various non-human virtual characters (such as elves, dwarves, ogres, gnomes, etc.), fantastic characters with supernatural abilities (shamans, mages or wizards) or futuristic avatars (e.g. Jedi knights, aliens). For example, the digital game *Spore* (*Maxis*, 2008) allows the player to create a large amount of unrealistic avatars. This results in rare and quite unique combinations of seemingly incompatible physical traits. Many players of this game actually prefer constructing monstrous virtual characters that correspond with the stereotypical media portrayals of 'villains'.

Such negative, monstrous and visually unattractive stylisations of game avatars are determined by the players' 'narrative laziness'. In other words, it is much easier to create a stooped person with a crooked smile and claws instead of fingers than to work on the character's personality continuously, i.e. through developing its actions, dialogue choices or attitudes. Moreover, the players who encounter such an avatar know what to expect from it. The ways avatars are visually elaborated are often deliberate, as this allows the players to reduce the characters' complexity to one basic character trait (aggressiveness, deceitfulness, overdeveloped sexuality). The avatar's visual appearance then 'defines' the specific character trait chosen in advance by the player. The selection of virtual avatars is thus compatible with the roles their creators aim to play; the avatars' customisations are purposeful, able to unambiguously communicate their status and abilities towards other players of the same digital game. The avatar's appearance is not just a form of the player's self-expression; it is also an instrumental part of the game that is deeply intertwined with the character's performance. This process of creating stereotypes and standardised portrayals is particularly obvious within digital games that involve graphic elements resembling of comics (e.g. *World of Warcraft* created by *Blizzard Entertainment*, 2004-2014, or *Wildstar* developed by *Carbine Studios*, 2014). However, digital

games that strive to offer more realistic appearances of simulated avatars (for instance, *The Sims* or *Elder Scrolls Online*) are not influenced by this trend, at least not significantly. Stylisation of virtual characters into 'beauties' and 'monsters' or into the good and the bad leads us towards interpretation shortcuts, towards a kind of mindless lethargy where everything is perceived automatically; in general, most of us like these easily understandable binary oppositions, but, on the other hand, we also tend to complain that nothing about them is new and original.

In addition to the two concepts discussed above, we also have to consider cases when characteristic traits of avatars in digital games **reflect features and attributes demanded by social and cultural conventions (the cult of body, the myth of beauty) or the player's unconscious notions of archetypes and mythical role models**. In this regard it is necessary to refer to R.M. Geraci's publication titled *Virtually Sacred. Myth and Meaning in Word of Warcraft and Second Life* [12]. Besides offering a useful body of knowledge, the author also pays attention to in-depth interviews with players of the said digital games. One of the respondents claims that she always constructs a female avatar with ideal proportions and height because she is, in fact, a short, overweight girl. That is why she wants to be more attractive at least in the 'false world' of digital games. The respondent thus transforms her avatars in accordance with the Western cultural imperatives related to beauty and physical attractiveness. It is also relevant to mention a girl playing the digital game *Whyville* (*Numedeon*, 1999) who, in interview published in the scholarly journal *Games and Culture*, states that she would like to change the colour of her hair to blonde. However, as she is of African-American descent, she thinks that this change of her physical appearance might be seen as strange. That is why she has used the digital game *Whyville* to create an avatar – her virtual self with dark complexion and blonde hair [11]. It is possible, however, that this simulated image presents a kind of projective identity which defines how the player actually looks like and how she would like to look. As it seems, the question of stylisation of virtual characters according to the dominant social and cultural conventions or archetypal images is a relatively new and so far unresolved issue worthy of appropriate scholarly attention.

4. Stylisation of virtual characters in accordance with socio-cultural conventions and archetypal images

Taking into consideration the aforementioned knowledge on serious-fun game mechanics, we have decided to reflect on the problem of creating virtual avatars on basis of generally respected (mainstream) socio-cultural conventions and preferred archetypal images. The experiment conducted by the English photographer R. Cooper offers useful information on this process. In his monograph titled *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators* [13]; the author compares photographs of several players of digital games and their virtual avatars' appearance. Some of the players' most interesting answers to R.

Cooper's additional questions are as follows: *"The difference between me and my avatar is obvious. In real life, I am physically disabled, but in Star Wars Galaxies I can ride a bike, kill monsters or just go to the bar with my friends. (...) In reality, people feel uncomfortable around me, but the game gives me the feeling of being just the same as anybody else."* (Jason) *"In real life, I work as a butcher and in EverQuest, I am a barbarian shaman. In the game, I have long hair and the body of an Olympic athlete. In reality, I am bald with a mediocre male figure."* (Kim) *"I am the first Korean transgender celebrity. (...) My favourite character is a female elf, but not all virtual characters I have created are females. I also 'own' a few very attractive male avatars."* (Harisu) *"In-game avatar offers me an opportunity to dress and behave in a way that is forbidden in South Korea. In the game Lineage, I can become a strong female warrior, deadly and gorgeous at the same time. I can use a sword and still look like a supermodel. The feeling of power is toxic!"* (Mi-Jin)

Various research activities conducted in 1996, 2006 and 2008 suggest that players of digital games tend to see virtual characters with round, delicate facial structures as friendly and open-minded. However, avatars looking a bit older are perceived as competent, respectable and capable of leading others. Glasses are also important here – virtual characters wearing glasses are seemingly more intelligent. On the other hand, visual representations of avatars with obese bodies are often criticised or perceived negatively, while avatars with fit, muscular bodies are seen as rather attractive, pleasant to look at. Extremely slim or even skinny avatars typically evoke mixed reactions [9, p. 94]. Another study from 2018 (titled *Avatars and Computer-Mediated Communication: A Review of the Definitions, Uses, and Effects of Digital Representations*) proves the hypothesis that gender determinants and various gender-related stereotypes associated with one's self-evaluation have to be considered as well, even though we talk only about computer-generated representations (simulations). It seems that female players trust female avatars much more than male avatars – the same applies to male players who put much more trust in male avatars than in female virtual characters. The stereotypical representations of female virtual characters involve another interesting phenomenon to observe – female avatars are sexually harassed much more often than their male counterparts. The study also shows that these stereotypical ways of presenting virtual characters in the digital environment are very similar to those disseminated by other types of mainstream media [14]. The mentioned research results definitely confirm what we have suggested earlier – that the ways players of digital games perceive physical appearance and beauty patterns are, to large extent, influenced by hedonistic elements of socio-cultural and media reality which are demonstrated through cultural and social stereotypes. We therefore state that virtual game characters, which reflect similar stereotypes and conventions, fully apply the so-called 'Proteus effect'.

The theory introducing the 'Proteus effect' was first established by N. Yee and J. Bailenson [15] at the Stanford University in 2007. The notion reflects on man's ability to construct multiple virtual identities within the cyberspace. This

phenomenon also explains how one's behaviour changes under the influence of her/his virtual representative, i.e. avatar. Various analyses of digital games applying the theory in question have shown that the avatar's appearance definitely influences the player's behaviour and status within the virtual communication environment; the more likeable the avatar is, the more self-consciousness the player gains. Most players of digital games tend to create avatars that are attractive, young, physically capable and well-built. Moreover, the players strengthen and further develop the 'Proteus effect' by using various archetypes and prejudicial visual associations (e.g. they might perceive virtual characters with African-American physiological traits as overly aggressive, hostile, untrustworthy or prone to committing crimes).

As we can see, the creation of simulative virtual contents is closely related to man's ability to generate visual associations and projections. According to S. Gálik [16], human fantasising is a conscious process, but there are also deeper, collective and unconscious images to consider – those defined as 'archetypes' by C.G. Jung and other psychoanalysts following his work. Theory of Digital Games is interested in archetypes in order to better understand the players' reactions to varied digital games, their contents, narratives and objects or characters they feature. Studying archetypes allows us to answer the key question – how to use these timeless symbols to keep the players emotionally engaged and bring them experience they desire.

Unconscious collective images are predominantly used in one specific genre of digital games – in role-playing games. Their narrative concepts are based on fantastic stories which offer a wide variety of ways to apply archetypes. Most of the well-known archetypes refer to mythological figures and fantastic worlds that are subsequently included in digital games of the given genre. For example, typical 'digital game archetypes' are easily identifiable in case of virtual characters simulating mythical heroes such as samurais or ninjas (*Tekken*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Soul Calibur* and similar digital game series), which are derived from Japanese culture and art. Confrontations and duels between heroes and diabolical characters (depicted as aliens, zombies, monsters, etc.) are also quite popular, as well as other straightforward binary oppositions. The given problem can be reflected on through S. Freud's timeless psychological theory, especially if we want to identify and thoroughly explain archetypes related to virtual characters in digital games. The author distinguishes between three aspects of human personality that can be seen as constitutive elements forming various kinds of heroes. *Id* is a narcissist and hedonistic hero who fulfils her/his objectives regardless of consequences; such a hero is focused on satisfying own physical needs and thus represents the lowest human impulses. *Ego* is a rational heroic character that appears as a communicative connection, as a liaison between two or more other (strongly opposed) archetypes. *Superego* is a heroic impersonation of the higher ideals and goals, a selfless hero without fear or reproach, whose own needs and possible benefits are reduced to minimum [D.K. Lapsley and P.C. Stey, *Id, Ego, and Superego*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237306175_Id_Ego_and_Superego].

The presence of these archetypal characters in digital games gives their narratives a certain mythical deepness – we may see avatars of different complexions, nationalities, ethnicities, races or genders fighting each other, and it is entertaining to watch these heroic struggles. Even though it is quite impossible to see a pirate and a samurai fighting one another in real life, digital games have no such boundaries and limitations; they are even required to offer these kinds of irrational possibilities. However, it is important to bear in mind that the people who consume the simulated portrayals are not passive audience members, but rather active players; we thus have to consider the ways such archetypal images influence the players' experience and perception patterns.

5. Conclusions

Game mechanics allow the players to enter the fictitious worlds of digital games; this strong immersion is able to provide them with the universally desirable feelings of freedom and happiness. Whether we talk about hard-fun, inner, satellite, people-fun, easy-fun or serious-fun game mechanics, it is necessary to point out that all of them somehow influence the construction of virtual reality and partially also the player's virtual identity. However, we would like to argue that the occurrence of game mechanics in their 'pure' forms is quite rare. More specifically, we may talk about the clear, elementary processes only on the lowest levels; as the body of knowledge on game systems gains both importance and scholarly prominence, the initial boundaries separating the specific game mechanics become blurred. In general, the above-mentioned categorical apparatus can still be regarded as valid and useful for further investigation within the given area of interest.

Stylisation of virtual characters in digital games is closely related to the processes of simulation; it also means that the given activity is most often dependent on game mechanics based on serious fun. The characteristic traits of virtual characters may or may not correspond with the players' real nature and appearance. However, creating virtual avatars on basis of widely established social and cultural conventions or archetypal images is immensely popular and therefore very common. L.T. Taylor [17] argues that nowadays it is necessary to reflect on the growing trend of constructing various experimental (unreal, monstrous, fantastic) avatars. According to the author, this situation is closely associated with the ways teenagers and young adults form their identity through experimenting with their 'other selves' and multiplying their own identities. Under the right circumstances, these multiplied identities (e.g. homosexual avatars, monsters, thieves, killers, etc.) can be very attractive. On the other hand, it is crucial to find out whether the player creates the avatar just for own amusement (individual experimenting), whether she/he wants to use the avatar to 'live through' the virtual life (game-related experimenting), or whether the avatar exists only to amuse, impress or shock other players (experimenting aimed at social interactions).

The theoretical frameworks clarifying the issue of self-presentation (e.g. the 'Proteus effect' mentioned above, 'the myth of beauty', 'the cult of body') cannot be ignored, because the combination of who we truly are and how we present ourselves in the virtual world filled with digital media now constitutes the most basic aspects of our identities. Although the virtual characters we create are often seen as the results of a one-way process, it is also reasonable to presume that they tend to change the ways we behave, act or look like (at least partially). The discussed concept thus can be used to reflect on other aspects of self-presentation in digital games, e.g. on the question whether there are any long-term consequences of the 'Proteus effect' that would directly influence the player's physical (real) existence.

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