Avatars and Virtual Immortality

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Abstract: Deceased people always left active legacies in the memories of the survivors who knew them, and in the consequences of the deeds they performed in life. Now, a very great variety of avatars and agents in virtual worlds is extending the scope of action for a growing number of living people, potentially continuing their active existence after death and fulfilling the fantasies of religion through information technology. Avatars need not reflect the person precisely, and indeed World of Warcraft calls them characters rather than avatars, suggesting that they have some independent nature. Some recent gamelike virtual worlds, notably Star Trek Online and Dungeons and Dragons Online, allow one to have four or five secondary avatars operating at once, and to set their degree of autonomy. As people gain more and more avatars, agents, and other technology based expressions of themselves, the scope for action during their lives increases, and the possibility of life after death becomes progressively more real.

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A hint of the human future can be found on Aldor Rise in Outland's Shattrath City in the massively multi player online role-playing game World of Warcraft. There stands Caylee Dak, an Elf huntress, with her nightsaber panther, Dusky. Her function is to bless any member of the Alliance who brings her a poem beginning, "Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there, I do not sleep. I am in a thousand winds that blow, across Northrend's bright and shining snow." As an avatar, Caylee Dak is an active memorial for a player named Dak Krause, who died of leukemia in 2007, dressed exactly as she was when she served as his avatar in this virtual world, now providing a hint of immortality for his departed soul.

Avatars need not reflect the person precisely, and indeed World of Warcraft calls them characters rather than avatars, suggesting that they have some independent nature. Thus, before we even begin to catalog the full range of avatars and agents that already exist, we should realize that they are expressions of the self, and the self may be expressed in many ways. I had 22 World of Warcraft characters, and invested more than 700 hours of my own existence in each of two of them, Maxrohn and Catullus. Maxrohn, a human priest, was named after my uncle, Max Rohn, who was an Episcopal priest and something of an adventurer; he once taught me a judo move that could break a man's arm. Thus, Maxrohn was a mixture of me and my uncle, and we all are partly reflections of the family members who have shaped our own characters. Catullus was based on the ancient Roman poet of that name, and I have published an essay bylined "Catullus," in the form of a letter from him to a supernatural being, namely me, about his own sense of being real.

Some recent gamelike virtual worlds, notably Star Trek Online and Dungeons and Dragons Online, allow one to have four or five secondary avatars operating at once, and to set their degree of autonomy. In a very real sense, these secondaries are programmable by the user, because one may set ahead of time which actions each one

can perform, and then in real time give them commands or leave them to operate autonomously. Their degree of artificial intelligence is low, but not entirely negligible, because, for example, they learn which enemies are doing the most damage to them and respond accordingly. When an artificial person has some degree of autonomy from control by its owner, we call it an agent.

Already, many people have information technology agents, but these agents are so simple we do not ordinarily think of them as such. Your answering machine acts in your stead when it says, "Sorry I'm not home now, please leave a message." Many companies use speech-recognition technology in more-sophisticated systems that can ask and answer questions, and it is just a matter of time before you will be able to do this with your home machine. Some investors use trading agents, programs that execute automatic stoploss actions in the stock market or follow more complex investment strategies without moment-to-moment supervision. If you ever rented a movie from Netflix and rated it afterward, or bought a book from Amazon.com, something like an agent representing you now exists inside the company's recommender system. These online businesses use data like movie-preference ratings and book purchases to advertise your favorites to other customers, aggregating your data with data from many others. This allows your personal preferences to operate somewhat autonomously, akin to an agent who votes for which movies or books should be promoted to customers like you.

The picture accompanying this article shows Sagittarius Sylvanus, my primary Dungeons and Dragons Online avatar, being magically protected by Fayden Maeleth, an Elf healer. Although the same species as Caylee, she lives in a different world, has different abilities, and is a secondary avatar rather than a primary actor. Across all 15 virtual worlds I have inhabited, I have had 50 primary avatars and an equal number of secondaries, yet one thing is missing: persistence. Two of my favorite gameworlds have been shut down: The Matrix Online and Tabula Rasa. To become permanent, virtual worlds must become important. One way they might do this is to give the avatars enough autonomy that they can continue to function, even when their owners are offline, doing useful work that would justify the low cost of maintaining their subscriptions. Our avatars and agents will not only help us and expand our scope, but in the very near future they will also cooperate with each other, forming mutually supportive virtual teams.

Over the hundreds of hours when Dak Krause operated Caylee, his World of Warcraft avatar, he made a vast number of decisions that expressed his own individual nature. All of his actions were temporarily stored in the gameworld's computer server and could have been used as the raw material for an artificial intelligence program to learn how to play the game the way he did-quite achievable with today's technology. If that had been done, Caylee could be playing a far more complex role-perhaps as a guard in Auberdine, the Elf seaside town-responding in the same ways that Krause would have to enemy attacks or requests for help from new players. As people gain more and more avatars, agents, and other technologybased expressions of themselves, the scope for action during their lives increases, and the possibility of life after death becomes progressively more real. Buckminster Fuller said, "I seem to be a verb."

I say, "I am a plural verb, in future tense."

Sidebar

Sagittarius Sylvanus is author William Sims Bainbridge's Dungeons and Dragons Online avatar.

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About the Author

William Sims Bainbridge is a sociologist currently managing the review of grant proposals in human-centered computing, and author of many books, including God from the Machine: Artificial Intelligence Models of Religious Cognition (AltaMira, 2006), The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World (MIT Press, 2010), and Multiplayer Online Games (Morgan and Claypool, 2010).

Subject: Virtual reality; Online entertainment; Deaths;