

# Virtual harm and attachment

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Thousands of women participate in multi-user online worlds such as Second Life. In these online communities, women can use their online personas—their avatars—to chat, fight, make friends and even get married. Yet the freedom that makes multi-user online worlds attractive to so many women can also pose risks. Virtual sexual harassment is, unfortunately, commonplace, ranging from verbal or textual harassment, to being confronted by overtly sexual avatars, to having one's avatar sexually attacked by another avatar.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes attackers are able to use built-in features on the online world to gain control over another person's avatar without their consent. In Second Life, for instance, "collars" which enable an avatar to gain control over another avatar can be built into many online objects without the knowledge of the other user (Durankse, 2007).

Virtual sexual assaults are often traumatic and deeply upsetting for the victims, sometimes to a greater extent than the victims themselves would have anticipated. The victims of the infamous 1992 LambdaMOO rape case,<sup>2</sup> for instance, were surprised at the strength of their own reactions. One victim told a reporter that, as she wrote about the experience, "posttraumatic tears were streaming down her face". She was a long-time participant in online communities, yet she was "baffled and overwhelmed by the force of her reaction" (Dibbell, 1993). Such reactions to virtual sexual attacks are common, particularly when victims have experienced real-life sexual assaults (Döring, 2000, p. 869).

But how seriously should we take virtual sexual assaults and other forms of interpersonal online attacks? Since no actual physical assault occurs, is virtual sexual assault a genuine moral harm? There is a tendency in the literature on this topic to dismiss victims' distress as evidence that they had too much emotional investment in their avatars; that they should have been less involved in the online world. Victims should just ignore virtual attacks, the argument runs, or just "log off".

I believe that this response is misguided. For a start, this response to virtual sexual assault blames the victims for the distress they feel, claiming that their distress is their fault for being too emotionally involved rather than the attacker's fault. But, as I shall argue, we should give moral legitimacy to people's attachment to their avatars because this attachment expresses their identity and self-conception, and for this reason attacks on avatars count as genuine moral wrongs. To argue otherwise risks undermining the moral status of attachments that we accept as morally significant, such as attachment to possessions, pets, people, communities, and ideals.

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## What is avatar attachment?

In online worlds an avatar is the controller's graphical representation which she uses to communicate with others in the online world through the use of text and image. The combination of a graphical image and textual communication create what psychologists call "presence"—the sense of being physically immersed in an environment. Presence results in avatar behaviour that mimics the ways we use our bodies in offline life. For example, participants in online worlds often report a strong sense of personal space and "body boundaries". Just as we move away if someone comes too close to us, so participants in online worlds will move their avatar away if another person's avatar moves too close. Similarly, participants will move their avatar close to other avatars if they wish to be aggressive or threatening, and such closeness can also be used to signal intimacy and friendship (Taylor, 2002, pp. 42–43).

- 1 As in real life, much online sexual harassment is directed against female users. Those who use female nicknames in chat rooms, and female avatars in virtual worlds (even if they are men) tend to be harassed to a far greater degree than male avatars (Döring, 2000, p. 869).
- 2 In 1992 a character called Mr Bungle used a feature of LambdaMOO (a text-based online community) to describe the two characters (legba and Starsinger) performing brutal and sexually explicit acts, without their consent, which everyone logged in at the time could read.

Avatars are therefore more than simply online objects manipulated by a controller. An avatar, even if it has physical and emotional traits that are very different from the controller's, is expressive of the controller's identity. Indeed, some participants in online worlds feel that their avatar is a truer reflection of their identity

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than their real life persona: "people often say that it was through their avatar that they found a 'better' version of themselves, one that felt even more right than their offline body" (Taylor, 2002, p. 55). This strong connection between controller and avatar is evident in the language that participants use to describe interactions in virtual worlds. An EverQuest player whose online character was shunned by others in the game made no distinction between herself and her avatar when she talked about the incident: "I was ignored ... I was crying too hard to play. My own guild didn't want me" (Yee, 2003). This identification between avatar and controller explains why people become attached to their avatars, and why attacks on an avatar are experienced as attacks on the controller.

But explaining the nature of avatar attachment does not tell us what attitude we should adopt towards it. Some commentators argue that avatar attachment should be discouraged precisely because "the more invested the controller, the more damaging virtual violence can be." (Huff, Johnson, & Miller, 2003, p. 17). Perhaps, as others have argued, victims of online attacks should consider just "stepping back" from their online personas: "perhaps the best defence [against virtual violence] ... is to unravel the psychological investment a bit" (Suler & Phillips, 1997).

These responses to virtual harm assume that avatar attachment is not morally significant, and so they blame the victims for being too invested in their characters. But why should we think avatar attachment is not morally significant? After all, we do not tell someone whose house was robbed that they should just "unravel their psychological investment" in their possessions. What's the difference between avatar attachment and other forms of attachment?

### Morally significant forms of attachment

In our everyday lives, there are many forms of attachment that we think of as morally significant. For example, it is considered quite acceptable for people to be at least moderately attached to their possessions. We take it for granted that people will be upset if their stereo or jewellery is taken, even though their distress would certainly be less if they were not so attached. Attachment to other people is even more important—an inability to be attached to other people is considered to be a serious moral and psychological failing. In many cases we also think that attachment to national, cultural or religious identity is morally legitimate, and that actions that cause harm to these attachments, such as racial insults, are genuine moral wrongs.

While there are obvious differences between them, these forms of attachment all play an important role in people's sense of identity and psychological wellbeing. We become attached to possessions not just because of their usefulness or aesthetic value but because they sometimes have deep personal significance. Our attachment to a religious or national identity is even more closely connected to our sense of ourselves. Indeed, there are certain kinds of moral wrongs that only make sense in the light of the importance that we give to this kind of attachment. Attempts to erode Indigenous cultures (for example, by banning the use of Indigenous languages) are considered to be serious moral wrongs in part because they attack the close connection between culture and identity, and we certainly do not think that people should deal with such attacks by being less attached to their culture or religion.

But there are also forms of attachment that we do not consider to be very important, morally speaking. Attachment to imaginary friends or fictional characters is generally not taken very seriously, even if the attachment is sincere. Most people do not consider harm done to an imaginary character to be a genuine moral wrong, even if people who are attached to that character are upset by it. Instead, we tend to think that people who are deeply attached to imaginary characters should try to lessen their attachment and recognise that the object of their attachment is not real, particularly since such attachments can undermine a person's capacity to function in society.

### Is avatar attachment morally significant?

At first glance, avatar attachment might seem similar to attachment to imaginary friends or fictional characters. Avatars are, after all, not real. They are creative constructions for use in a fantasy environment. So perhaps avatar attachment should be discouraged for the same reasons we would discourage someone's attachment to a fictional character. However, avatars are very different from imaginary friends or fictional

characters. Avatars are the controller's persona in a virtual world—they are forms of self-expression and personal identity. Avatars are the creation of the controller and unlike imaginary friends or fictional characters, the conduit through which she interacts with others in the online world.

Furthermore, avatars are used among a community of participants who all use avatars to communicate with each other. So unlike other forms of imaginary objects, avatars are used in worlds composed of what one author called a “shared symbolic order” (Riva, 2002, p. 589)—a community of shared values and behavioural expectations. Avatar attachment is expressive of self-identity and gains legitimacy from the shared environment in which it occurs, and so we cannot dismiss avatar attachment as morally insignificant without dismissing other forms of attachment that are similarly connected to identity and occur in a setting of shared social values, such as attachment to religious identity or nationality.

Still, we might think that we should discourage avatar attachment because such attachment makes it more likely that you will be upset if your avatar is attacked. It is true that detachment would reduce someone's distress at an attack on their avatar, but the problem is that attachment is also an important source of enjoyment. A study of Lineage players found that those who were psychologically involved with the game had the highest sense of belonging, trust, and loyalty within the game world (Whang & Chang, 2003, p. 598). Encouraging detachment would therefore undermine one of the reasons that people participate in online communities in the first place.

Furthermore, this objection cannot be limited to avatar attachment. Our attachment to people, to communities, to possessions, and to ideals means that we suffer deeply when these are harmed or threatened. If the reason for discouraging avatar attachment is that it causes distress, then this is a reason for discouraging attachment to people, possessions, and communities. Yet to do so would deny us attachments that are central to who we are and to our ability to live fulfilling human lives. Suffering is the price we pay for the joy and fulfilment that such attachments can give us, and for many of us it is a price worth paying. We recognise the importance of these attachments to our identity and wellbeing, and so we treat harms to these attachments as moral wrongs—and we do not blame victims for being too attached. For the same reasons, we should recognise avatar attachment as morally legitimate, and see attacks on avatars as genuine moral wrongs.

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