

BECOMING OTHERS

PLAYING THE VIRTUAL IDENTITY AND INTIMACY¹

TORNAR-SE OUTROS

Jogar a identidade e intimidade virtuais

CONVERTIRSE EN OTROS

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ABSTRACT

By revisiting Gilles Deleuze's notion of the virtual, this work examines what the virtual world means for our identity and intimacy. We sketch three effects of the virtual world: 1) the complete disintegration of public-private boundary; 2) the emerging performativity of virtual identities; 3) the destabilization of our ontology. From public life to multiplayer online role-playing games, we show the changing meaning of play in various contexts: performing, acting, and becoming. Following Richard Sennett's dramaturgical perspective of the public Man, we see people proactively perform the image to construct the real-world identity. Then in the video games, players choose a virtual identity to act in the game world, transforming it into a liminal space where continued identity transitions become possible. We analyze several cases, including Otherkin and Otaku subculture, to argue that virtual identity and community can bring ontological indeterminacy and propose a program that coexists with otherness.

Keywords: the virtual. identity. intimacy. play. online games. Otherkin.

RESUMO

Ao revisitar a noção de virtual de Gilles Deleuze, este trabalho examina o que o mundo virtual significa para a nossa identidade e intimidade. Traçamos três efeitos do mundo virtual: 1) a completa desintegração da fronteira público-privada; 2) a performatividade emergente das identidades virtuais; 3) a desestabilização da nossa ontologia. Da vida pública

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aos jogos de interpretação de papéis, mostramos a mudança do significado do jogo em vários contextos: atuar, representar e tornar-se. Seguindo a perspectiva dramatúrgica do Homem público de Richard Sennett, vemos pessoas a executar proativamente a imagem para construir a identidade do mundo real. Depois, nos jogos de vídeo, os jogadores escolhem uma identidade virtual para atuar no mundo do jogo, o que transforma o mundo do jogo num espaço liminar onde as transições de identidade continuadas se tornam possíveis. Analisamos vários casos, incluindo a subcultura Otherkin e Otaku, para argumentar que a identidade virtual e a comunidade podem trazer indeterminação ontológica e propor um programa que coexista com a alteridade.

Palavras-chave: o virtual. identidade. intimidade. jogo. jogos online. Otherkin.

RESUMEN

Al revisar la noción de lo virtual de Gilles Deleuze, este trabajo examina lo que el mundo virtual significa para nuestra identidad e intimidad. Esbozamos tres efectos del mundo virtual: 1) la completa desintegración de la frontera público-privada; 2) la performatividad emergente de las identidades virtuales; 3) la desestabilización de nuestra ontología. Desde la vida pública hasta los juegos de rol online, mostramos el significado cambiante del juego en varios contextos: actuar, actuar y convertirse. Siguiendo la perspectiva dramatúrgica de Richard Sennett sobre el Hombre público, vemos que las personas interpretan proativamente la imagen para construir la identidad del mundo real. Luego, en los videojuegos, los jugadores eligen una identidad virtual para actuar en el mundo del juego, lo que transforma el mundo del juego en un espacio liminal donde se hacen posibles las transiciones de identidad continuas. Analizamos varios casos, como el de Otherkin y la subcultura Otaku, para argumentar que la identidad y la comunidad virtuales pueden aportar indeterminación ontológica y proponer un programa que coexista con la alteridad.

Palabras clave: el virtual. identidad. intimidad. juego. juegos online. Otherkin.

Introduction

The digital network has comprehensively changed our lifeworld, and the intimate relationships that occur in it are receiving increasing attention from scholars. This shift has not only phenomenological origins but is also influenced by new materialism. The former reminds us that our existence and connections with others constitute who we are. With the spread of the Internet, our living experience is inevitably gained from the digital world. Thus, its occurrence, development, and transformation affect our identity and the lifeworld. New materialists suggest that objects are not neutral but that their material existence shapes our meanings and values. Inspired media theorists, such as Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, suggest that we should understand new media not as a series of fragmented objects (such as computers, cell phones, or e-books), but rather as a series of mediation processes. They reveal how we exist and coexist in the technological world, our emergence, and our way of intra-acting (Kember, Zylinska, 2011)². Thus, examining different mediation processes will help us understand our existence in the technological world.

Long before the advent of the Internet, sociologist Richard Sennett drew on a materialist perspective to diagnose contemporary identity and intimacy. In *The Fall of the Public Man*, he argued that the homogenization of public space in European cities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would lead to the stifling of everyday social interaction, the authoritarian domination of intimacy, and the loss

² "Intra-action" is a term used by Karen Barad to replace "interaction," which requires the pre-construction of "bodies" before mutual participation in action. The theory of "intra-action" believes that agency is not merely an intrinsic property of individuals or humans, but rather a dynamic force in which all "things" constantly exchange, diffract, influence, and work inseparably. Thus, it rejects the notion of absolute separation or objectivity in classical philosophy.

of otherness. Ultimately, public life would face extinction. Zygmunt Bauman shares the same pessimism, although it came from another perspective revealing that the corrosive personal relationships have rendered intimacy insipid, vapid, and unworkably fragile. In *Liquid Love*, he described modern society as liquefied with rampant "individualization" and uncanny frailty of human bonds (Bauman, 2013), implying that the convergence of modernity and technological changes had jeopardized intimacy. For him, virtual intimacy alters the human connection to more frequent and shallower, more intense, and briefer.

We are indeed facing an entirely different "material environment" and coping with a new way of social interaction. However, if we examine the above assertions through a new materialist lens, we might conclude differently. First of all, today's public space is not as homogenized as Sennett suggests. The virtual world has created alternative ways of constructing identities and intimacy. While it has further dismantled the division between the public and private spheres, the dramaturgy of public life has not disappeared but has permeated everyday life. In this process, social media and online multiplayer games redefine the "self" and "other" in relationships, that the former produces the real-world identity and the latter virtual identity. We compare the differences and clarify that virtual identities actualized by personas and avatars provide new identity paradigms and intimacy models (Berlant, 2000).³ Liquid love might brew an approach to actualize polymorphic intimacy, which allows us to question orthodox intimacy and communication and embrace the process of "becoming". Finally, the Otherkin subcultural group will serve as a particular case to illustrate how virtual identity challenges the original ontological categories.

Fluidifying Public-private Boundary: Play

Sennett listed three ways of understanding public life in the West: 1) Jürgen Habermas's theory of "communicative interaction"; 2) Hannah Arendt's theory of "citizenship"; and 3) his model of dramaturgy. This model states that the self in public space is the result of dramatic interaction, that its social relations are sustained by the self-playing the same role to the same audience on different occasions, and that this playing is not always limited to one role.⁴ All three approaches presuppose a division between the public and private spheres. Sennett, for example, sees the private sphere as a field of self-expression, intimacy, and shared feelings, but not the public sphere. In his view, industrial capitalism and secularization's destruction of the public sphere will affect two aspects of social life: the city and politics. Citizens became so obsessed with the search for intimacy that we have lost sight of the nature of the city as a theater of communication for the authentic, impersonal public. In a nutshell, the city is "the place where strangers meet." At the same time, politics has been depoliticized as we are more leaning on addressing power and resource distribution issues through the virtues of trust or the private sphere.

While Sennett's diagnosis still seems valid today, it is more complex considering evolving lifeworld. Given this, we must look at how people present themselves and interact in social media to see the impact of mediation. Indeed, the media further dissolves the public-private boundary, but this does not necessarily have negative consequences. On the one hand, the Internet not only provides individuals with broader access to others but also allows people to construct a public image of themselves; on the other hand, because the maintenance of an online self's image also involves the personal circle, it requires individuals to behave in a manner that is consistent with the private sphere. The ensuing politicization of the private sphere helps shed light on the issues of family ethics and sexual ethics that used to be considered of no account.

³ Here, intimacy refers to the concept after the critical development of feminist scholars (such as Lauren Berlant). It includes all the "kinds of connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for a living." Critical intimacy studies focus on deconstruction of binary opposition between public and private, mediation tradition relationship norms, and political potentiality of intimacy.

⁴ Sennett's dramaturgical model can also be found in Erving Goffman. Goffman defines it as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants." (Goffman, 1956)

Before the Internet became widespread, individuals used to be able to selectively maintain identities in relatively fixed settings, such as a father or husband at home, a professor on campus, and an intellectual in another social context. These roles are usually relatively stable and mutually independent. However, these spatial compartments become less clear after the Internet penetration, and stable personal identities are shaken. Particularly during the epidemic, when so much activity was moved online, our spatial properties became blurred—our living rooms could instantly become classrooms or political arenas for public discourse. This "identity disorder" makes it difficult for individuals to tailor their identities in specific contexts and, therefore, to manage information sharing. People who use social media avidly find it challenging to realize that everyday sharing is, in fact, a private sphere publication.⁵ We have witnessed countless events where netizens searched, collected, and exposed an ordinary person's personal information because of a single incident and suddenly became the public topic of conversation.

Some researchers pay attention to these phenomena and analyze them. For example, Hiroki Azuma acutely sums up two models of narrative consumption after observing the shift from a modern world image to a postmodern world image in Japanese Otaku culture (Azuma, 2009)⁶. His analysis echoing postmodernism will come into play for elaborating virtual community. Two models—Tree models (left) and the Database models—explain how we are leaning upon grand narrative in the modern age, which prompts us to grasp an image of the world through the tree model and obtain a worldview that is more reliant on the hidden structure and overarching philosophy. However, with the advent of postmodernism, this tree structure completely collapsed. Azuma brings up the database model (or a reading-up model) to help us understand the postmodern world. For instance, the Web has no center and no dominant hidden grand narrative. There is a double-layer structure on Internet, in which coded information can accumulate, and individual Web pages grow with the user's superficial reading. The distinction between the postmodern double-layer structure and the modern tree structure is whether a narrative hides under the surface we read. The database model means the outer surface layer in the postmodern world is not determined by the deep inner surface. That is to say, Otaku's self-images do not require a grand narrative for support; their online presentation becomes a direct performance on the public stage, where people tend to grasp one's rough image through quick "reading up".

However, the fluidity of spatial attributes, identities, and narrative consumption can also have positive results in that individuals realize the need for flexible identity and begin to construct the image of cyberself actively. Social networking sites have reconfigured relationships' "flexibility, informality, and conviviality" by openly displaying personal relationships (Chambers, 2013). Alison Hearn points out that most social media users consciously and purposefully create specific images of themselves to influence their public perceptions. She describes such behavior as constructing "meta-narratives and meta-images" of the self (Hearn, 2008). In this process, the production of self-images requires an active self-alienation, which blurs the distinction between the personal self and the gazed object while erasing the boundary between the concept of self and the consumption objects of capitalist production. The individual can gradually become aware of how the social self is constructed (Tufekci, 2008). We are no longer mere objects under the gaze of the other, but we can introspect under the gaze and even adopt the mechanism to construct self-narratives. This is profoundly illustrated by artist Amalia Ulman's performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014). By analyzing the history of Instagram celebrities, she curated three fictional life stages and earned herself nearly 100,000 followers through a four-month social media performance. The way Ulman rehearsed herself through social media and imitated celebrities manifests that the mystery of online self-image is hidden in the cracks of the disintegration of the public and private spheres. Because the private information transmitted to the social platform can become public at any time, and one's meta-narratives and meta-images need to be complemented by the private sphere, the self is also the public self.

⁵ In the Foucauldian sense, it also helps build Panopticon—everyone has placed oneself in a prison that can be watched, and everyone has access to watch others.

⁶ A subculture that emerged in Japan in the 1970s. It is growing with the vast entertainment industry and the expansion of the Internet, where anime, video games, the virtual community are booming.

On the other hand, the shaping of the online self is not one-sided; it also requires the provision of an "imagined audience" (Boyd, 2011). Just as a product needs to establish a consumer base before being launched, social media users can adjust their self-images by imagining their audiences' preferences. This makes WeChat's "Moments"⁷ a micro-field of self-image playing, as it mixes different audiences, such as family, friends, family, colleagues. It is a common dilemma of posting in WeChat when we want a post to be seen by one group of people and not by another. The WeChat team obviously recognizes the inconvenience of mixed audiences for social media users and therefore offers a blocking feature that allows people to "target" the content to particular audiences. This reveals that these imagined audiences are highly manipulated, selected, and pre-determined to share specific characteristics and thus passively subjected to an advertised image about a particular self. Just as Jean Paul Sartre described, the self is simultaneously being-for-itself and being-for-others; or like the sociologist, George Herbert Mead asserted: I become the Me in the eyes of others, necessarily through the process of I internalizing others (Mead, 1934); in this process, the selves as actors and the others as audiences are always in a dynamic of interchange. Moreover, this transformation is no longer limited to the original public sphere but works simultaneously in the private sphere, thus bringing the ethics of the private sphere into focus. Given that the self is expressed and negotiated in a highly visible way through social media, the publicization of the self inevitably involves a renegotiation of the public and private spheres.

As mentioned above, the cyberself has multiple identities and the autonomy to construct identities by manipulating virtual, generalized others. In some cases, others may also break away from this manipulation and take the initiative to examine the authenticity of one's image. For example, we can see many screenshots of conversations on social media in internet events. These transcripts are precisely the result of converting the passive image-receiving audience into an active image portraying participant. In this way, the dramaturgical model of public life continues in cyberspace. Only the *theatrum mundi*, which was relatively static, has evolved into multiple parallel theaters, where identity plays are no longer just the interpretation of a priori role also the performing of a virtual identity. Thus, the dramaturgical model of public life does not merely mean that individuals, like actors, play their social roles. Its development by the theory of speech-acts emphasizes the difference between performance and performativity, which means that individuals can play a new identity through perlocutionary acts⁸ (Austin, 1962). This situation further develops in massively multiplayer online role-playing games.

Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games: Virtual

If social media provides more abundant conditions for self-performing, then massively multiplayer online games allow the essence of play to be fully realized. While for many users, the online self remains an extension of the offline self (Robinson, 2007). However, more scholars are noticing the differences that virtual worlds bring. For example, in video games, players are free to build a virtual lifeworld by taking on an avatar. Unlike social media users keen to construct their meta-narratives, game players are more interested in adopting or creating completely virtual identities, creating new kinds of intimacy. In *Virtual Intimacy*, Shaka McGlotten describes the intimate landscape in the *World of Warcraft* as a multiverse (McGlotten, 2013). He points out that while the two dominant types of relationships in WoW—team play and solo play—are primarily instrumental as a means to achieve particular game ends. Nevertheless, because the *Warcraft* universe consists of multiple worlds, and thousands of gamers bring multiplicities, this makes WoW an active field for new kinds of intimate relationships and allows these relationships to be transformed into "a means without an end". Then the virtual world might be a chance to actualize the polymorphic intimacy.

⁷ "Moments" is a function of the app WeChat, which is also called "Friends' circle" in the Chinese version. It means users can share and get access to WeChat friends' information, creating an intimate and private communicating circle within the users' choice of close friends—quoted from Wikipedia.

⁸ Perlocutionary act refers to saying something that produces specific consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience.

In his view, the dominant instrumental relationships in *Warcraft* are caused by the constrained factors of the game, including limited identity, space, time, and belonging. First, *Warcraft* players need to choose their avatar before entering the game. These avatars are jointly imagined and constructed through numerous media such as computers, card games, comics, novels, and movies. As history shapes the identities in the offline world, *Warcraft* players inherit its narrative, class, gender, race, and connections by choosing an identity. In addition, players sometimes encounter situations where they cannot move forward, where an invisible wall stops their avatars. This reveals the constraining space of WoW and the existence of the virtual world as a closed system. Time is more restrictive than space. Because players, like everyone else, have only 24 hours in a day. Time resists virtualization in a way that space does not, which becomes a significant limitation of the game. The constraining nature of identity, space, and time ultimately limits the types of relationships in WoW. The result is that the dominant intimacy in *Warcraft* still reproduces the scripts of the offline world, and normative desires and ideals still bind players' connections.

However, there are exceptions. For example, many players adopt gender roles different from their own to participate and perform them throughout the game (Martey, 2014). Also, McGlotten mentions his involvement in the "The Amazons of Kalimdor" guild, which does not restrict the game player's identity, but only allows players to participate with female avatars. This has given rise to a gaming camaraderie based on gender roles. In addition, there are more cases, such as online romance stories developed in WoW due to gaming encounters, exchanging emotions through in-game texts, or traveling together in the game world (Freeman, Bardzell, Bardzell, 2016)⁹. All these phenomena result from players practicing the possibility of virtual identities. However, it is common to dismiss these virtual identities or intimacy and assume that these situations cannot lead to any normative commitment. While they may give rise to new forms of relationships, they do not matter, "they are fantastic or simulated, imaginative, incorporeal, unreal. (McGlotten: 7)" However, McGlotten argues that Gilles Deleuze's explanation of the virtual will open up a new perspective for understanding these phenomena and clarify that the virtual is not opposed to the real and that virtual identities and emotional relationships are part of the process of actualization.

In Deleuze's ontology of becoming, "the virtual" is a concept that needs to be understood with "the actual". The two are mutually exclusive, yet together fully characterize the real. In his view, reality is not a linear process of development from one actual to another, but a movement from the actualized state of affairs, through a dynamic field of virtual/real tendencies, to the actualization of this field in a new state of affairs. We can illustrate it with the following schema: virtual/real \leftrightarrow actual/real \leftrightarrow virtual/real, which goes round and round to infinity¹⁰. Here the virtual is vitality, events, the past, "the impassive and dynamic aspects of multiplicities in the process of actualization." It has the capacity to trigger actualization, but it always remains distinct from its actualization (Boundas, 2005). Thus "the virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in the process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality" (Deleuze, 2001). The virtual is conceptual but not abstract, real but not actualized. Therefore, the virtual has been latent in reality long before the Internet. For example, in *The Virtual*, sociologist Rob Shields follows this lead and argues that the virtual is the reality that is not yet actual (Shields, 2003). He examines the "virtual" space in traditional rituals such as the Christian Eucharist or the Rites of Passage of different cultures (Gennep, 1960).¹¹ These rituals virtually transform the place where they take place into a liminal space, a unique space-time that people experience in life transitions. As an intermediary zone between two realms, it flows and meets the qualities of different spaces, in which individuals have the complex experience of identity transition.

Therefore, the online video game's virtual world can also be regarded as a liminal space in which virtual identity operates in a concrete and real way and initiate the actualization of new intimate relationships.

⁹ Different multiplayer online games also develop diverse intimacy landscapes. As some studies of *Audition Online* have pointed out, the game is dominated by "couples" playing together and produces a whole relationship development mechanism.

¹⁰ This schema not only shows the reversibility of the process but also the structure of temporality.

¹¹ "Rites of Passage" refer to the rituals performed when a person leaves one group and enters another, involving significant changes in social status. The original French term was invented by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in *Les Rites de Passage* (1960).

It encourages us to explore the expansive forms of virtual intimacy in various online communications without the presupposed forms and ideas (*eidos*). We can experiment with different identities in this process, crossing the categorical boundaries of social and embodied existence. The dichotomy between virtual and real, online and offline, is no longer viable. If we accept Deleuze's explanation of the virtual, then the Internet could be seen as a generative space that allows individuals to change their state of being and achieve new bodily norms, embodied experiences, and self-identification.

Virtual community and Otherkin becoming

We have shown that virtual communities make traditional social identity and relationships less stable. Players of game worlds are more open to creating alternative roles with different genders and abilities and forming intimate connections with other users through these roles. Eva Zekany provides an example of how people become new identities and are involved in new intimate relationships in the physical world through virtual communities.¹² Otherkin is the group of people who consider themselves partially or entirely non-human in soul, spirit, or psyche, including those who believe that their physical bodies are not what they really are. There is a similar concept of Otherkin in anime culture—じんがい. It originally referred to non-human beings such as animals and monsters. After the development of literature and anime culture, it also refers to subhumans or robots. Many Otherkin consider themselves as characters in video games, anime, novels, or movies, practice a specific style of life in their daily lives (e.g., cosplay culture) and socialize mainly in the virtual communities. Through the lens of media ontology, Zekany attempts to analyze how Otherkin constructs their identities and communities through mediation, drawing on Stiegler's theory of technical evolution to elucidate the symbiotic evolution of humans and technics and point out that the core of human ontology is, in fact, non-human (Zekany, 2018).

Inspired by Deleuze's concept of "the virtual", we revisited the virtual and real relationship and relocated virtual identity and intimacy as part of the real. Based on this, the Otherkin as a virtual identity can also be considered a real identity of becoming. It represents not only a potential identity but also different mediation paradigms and models of intimacy. Zekany associates the virtual with the theory of affect. Because Brian Massumi has pointed out that affect is virtual:

Affects are virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them. The autonomy of affect is its participation in the virtual. Its autonomy is its openness (Massumi, 2002).

As a pre-subjective, pre-personal, non-conscious experiential force¹³, the affect is always simultaneously involved in "the virtual in the actual" and "the actual in the virtual", as Deleuze describes the movement of becoming, where one emerges from the other and returns to the other. In other words, affect is always implicit in virtual connections. Affect occurs not only in intimacy but also through intimacy. Based on this, Zekany analyzes how Otherkin perform their identities at different affective levels: first, through the flow and intensity of the medium; second, through affinity-based virtual communities (Haraway, 1991)¹⁴; and third, through intimate encounters between users and machines, that enable a kind of embodiment, in which one become posthuman through the ongoing mutual construction of humanity and technics.

This work cannot be put forward without Bernard Stigler's arguments for technics evolution. In *Technics and Time*, he proposes that human is essentially historical. Technics is an idiosyncratic reality in the evolution of humans and, unlike what we usually think, technics is not invented by man, but human

¹² Virtual community refers to the communities where people using computers to communicate, form friendships, intimacy, and the basis of societies.

¹³ Brian Massumi distinguishes between emotion and affect: emotion is a personal and subjective experience, while affect is a pre-subjective, pre-personal "intensity". Intensity implies the impact or persistence of the experience, expressed by the most direct and autonomous embodied response, manifested on the surface of the body and in contact with things.

¹⁴ Affinity, borrowed from Donna Haraway, refers to a relationship determined by choice rather than blood.

invents technics while inventing themselves within it. Thus, "the history of technics...is also the history of humanity" (Stiegler, 1998). He proposes the concept of *epiphylogenesis* to reject the fixed humanity and emphasizes that all the characteristics of a species are not determined a priori in the embryo but gradually emerge in later growth. The evolution of life continues along with means other than life. Here, technics is understood as a constitutive force that emerges with the category "human" at the very beginning, which both share a co-originary nature. In this light, Zekany suggests that when examining the Otherkin subculture, we should not view the medium through which Otherkin are sustained as a mere platform or accept the critics of Otherkin opponents, which suggest that Otherkin performs their identity only because of their desire to be "others". On the contrary, we should see Otherkin as part of *epiphylogenesis*, whose embodiment and intimacy will provide a different ontological project within and with the medium.

In addition, because Otherkin interpret their term as "kin to the Other", Jay Johnston notes the special kinship between the Otherkin and otherness. He notes that "otherness" was once conceptualized as alterity (radical difference), a threatening presence that the subject must confront and contend with. However, many scholars have recently realized that the otherness can also be productive and destabilize the subject's solidified ontological ground (Johnston, 2013). As Sennett says, we need to encounter the others. Otherkin precisely present one solution when we confront the animal as the other. It dissolves the two ontological categories of human and animal and offers us the possibility of a transpecies identity. As mentioned above, the virtual world of the Internet provides space for this transition of identity, in which the virtual identity of Otherkin is played out in a concrete and real way. Furthermore, Stigler's dissolution of the ontological categories of "human" and "technics" is also fully evident in the Otherkin subculture. This echoes the gradual dissolution of the distinctions between real/virtual, organic/inorganic, and human/nature. Here, the Otherkin is not an abnormal "exception" but a becoming that emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the virtual world and human beings in a continuous mutual generation.

Beyond the case of Otherkin, we also find affinity-based groups in the Fandom communities, which constitute people who share the same interests in particular things, such as movies, celebrities, comics, fashions, and even opportunities to buy and sell related merchandise. Fandom culture has drawn little attention for long until it proves its action potential during the pandemic. To be specific, many fandoms show their concerns and unite the group promptly as effective civilian rescue teams when China was facing a difficult situation because of the coronavirus. They organize various resources and assist in delivering medical supplies to hospitals through the network based on the virtual communities. It reveals that even people from entirely different classes or regions can develop a bond based on affinity. What is more, with more flexibility and informality, they can act without the limitation of bureaucracy and respond to the State of Exception. In sum, the virtual community has shown its political permeability and the capability to challenge the monopoly of the existing class and revive the citizen-based democratic project.

Conclusion

So far, we sketch a thread of how the virtual world changes individual identities and intimate relationships. First of all, the emergence of social media has completely dissolved the traditional division between the public and private spheres. Then it reinforces the nature of play in online networking. Here, playing means not only performing but also generating and experimenting with new identities. Multiplayer role-playing games turn the virtual world into a liminal space for identity transformation, allowing virtual identities and intimacy to be actualized. Affirming these will allow us to embrace the ontological indeterminacy and a possible paradigm for affinity with the other. As Johnston reminds us, the Otherkin subculture providing a means of affirming species differences and reconfiguring ontology is rather political than pathological. Perhaps the Otherkin can be regarded as a political myth like

Cyborg¹⁵ (Haraway: 149), offering an opportunity to perform becoming identities and negotiate new ethical and political regulations. Rather than simply dismissing the subcultures produced by the virtual world, these cultures should be considered carefully to recalibrate our subjectivity and learn how to live with alterity. Their practice offers us a more complex, radical, and creative ontological experiment through concrete and authentic engagement with the real. In doing so, we can reimagine post-humanist images of the subject and the associated kinship.

Also, the transformation of intimacies in Asia, whether romantic, familial, or communal, is marked as a unique situation compared to the Western, considering the region has seen the proliferation of its "homegrown" digital culture such as WeChat, bilibili, TikTok. Some point out a phenomenon of "global intimacies" emerging from Asia (Cabañes, Uy-Tioco, 2020), which refers to various imaginaries and practices among the virtual intimacies that negotiate global modernity and local life. Although the increasing globalization, capitalism, and secularization contribute to cultural homogenization, the simultaneity, and the inter-penetration of two geopolitical levels, people are reconfiguring the local networks and enacting global relationships. What Asian virtual communities display is unique: they normalize and subvert the conventional intimacies, which invents the past and performs multiplicities while struggling with the existing framework. It reminds us that we should work more prudently when the issue of intimacy comes from a different cultural background.

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that virtual identities, denying the boundaries of identity on which human subjects depend, also leave themselves in a contradiction. In the case of Otherkin, on the one hand, their difference rests on the ontological difference they seek to erase, and if the animal-human distinction does not exist, then neither does Otherkin exist; on the other hand, if Otherkin remains as others, the legitimacy of its identity will continue to be questioned. More importantly, like the concerns raised to affect theory, the generative power of affirmation will also encounter problems: is it permanent? Or does the ontology of becoming instead lead us to nihilism? Are virtual identities and intimacies beyond reproach? Do we even have a basis for judging these identities and relationships? How do we build up the ethics above a wasteland that post-humanists left? As Howard Rheingold reminded us to be aware of the Janus-face of the virtual. With much of our intimate data and behavior moving into cyberspace, the critics of potential totalitarian information network abuse are also worth considering (Rheingold, 2000).

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¹⁵ Donna Haraway described a cyborg is a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction".

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