Avatar (A'): Contrasting Lacan's Theory and 3D Virtual Worlds. A Case Study In Second Life

Contrastando la Teoría de Lacan y los mundos virtuales en 3D. Un caso de estudio en Second Life

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Abstract

Lacan did not propose a totalized subject, but he proposed a divided one whose representation is structured in each interaction with its peers through Saussure's argumentative language. This shows the real, the imaginary or the symbolic as (a), (a') or (A). This study tries to propose and discuss that it is currently possible to establish virtual issues, taking into account social and psychological effects of the cyberspace and the capacity to decide and execute actions. Virtually, the representation is given by the Avatar known as (A'), since it is an evolution of the Other (A). This interaction is being

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done through the use of language, with the construction of signifieds and signifiers. Signifieds are conceived in the virtual world and signifiers in the real one, but the last one could allow the first one to materialize the Other (A) in the Avatar (A'). Second Life is a metaverse, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), which shows 3D virtual worlds where each subject is able to create its Avatars characterizing its own identity through the subject's desires.

Keywords: Avatar, the Other, multi-user Games, Lacan, Second Life, psychoanalysis.

Resumen

Lacan no propuso un sujeto totalizado, pero propuso uno dividido cuya representación se estructura en cada interacción con sus pares a través del lenguaje argumentativo de Saussure. Esto demuestra lo real, lo imaginario y lo simbólico como (a), (a ') o (A). Este estudio trata de proponer y discutir que es posible actualmente establecer cuestiones virtuales, teniendo en cuenta los efectos sociales y psicológicos del ciberespacio y la capacidad de decidir y ejecutar acciones. Prácticamente, la representación es dada por el Avatar conocido como (A '), ya que es una evolución de las otras (A). Esta interacción se lleva a cabo mediante el uso del lenguaje, con la construcción de significados y significantes. Significados son concebidos en el mundo virtual y significantes en la real, pero el último podría permitir al primero materializar el Otro (A) en el Avatar (A '). Second Life es un metaverso, un juego del rol multi-jugador masivo en línea (MMORPG), que muestra mundos virtuales en 3D en el que cada sujeto es capaz de crear sus avatares caracterizar su propia identidad a través de los deseos del sujeto.

Palabras clave: Avatar, el Otro, Juegos de Multi-usuarios, Lacan, Second Life, psicoanálisis.

INTRODUCTION

Lacan tried to guide psychoanalysis back to its origin through re-reading Freud's work, taking the concept of "structure" as a starting point and adapting the linguistic environment into a new conception of subjectivity. Quoting Lacan's words (2006) "the unconscious, I mean the unconscious that Freud speaks about, is structured like a language", in which Saussure's linguistic concepts, produce the unconscious. According to Lacan, Saussure's proposal is structuralist, centred in the analysis of the spoken word as an individual expression, different to linguists of the time who used the written word. Thus, this proposal allows a relation with Freud's fundamental concepts. It is possible to infer that if Lacan's linguistic foundations had been based on the written language, his postulates could have been different.

Writing is the place of promises that are somehow illusory, where the subject is circumscribed by the unconscious in the paths of logic exempt from surprises, which are unconscious productions like jokes, dreams, slips of tongue, unfulfilled actions and symptoms (Lacan, 2007). Doubtedly, something could be materialized from that promise, keeping an element out of any negotiation: the ambiguous signifier/signified continues to be untouchable even in the written word, as far as the signifier represents a subject in view of another signifier making impossible the detention or solution of the signifier's "metonymic" chain. Although writing per se does not guarantee the subject to escape untouched from the desire impasses, anonymity and reduction of reality boundaries of a virtual existence in cyberspace could come close to the subject's escape (Turkle, 1995). Lacan (2007) quoted Saussure: "The sign presupposes the someone to whom it gives a sign of something. It is this someone whose shadow concealed the way into linguistics"(p. 170), but what happens when an individual is virtual and communication is electronic? The possible structure of the Lacanian subject should be revised from a linguistic centred in the digital written language rather than the spoken one.

Several elements of the Lacanian theory make possible the contrast proposed by this research. Firstly, the consideration of a non-totalized

subject but a subject divided in the states of R.S.I.(Real, Symbolic, Imaginary), secondly, Saussure's conceptions about the poor development of written language and thirdly, the declared boundaries of the Other. Finally, the possibility of a fifth state which Pommier (2005) recognized from Lacan "it will require later on that that reality band, located as a phantom, works as an open window to reality"(p. 41) , this window would possibly be the virtual world only if the cyberspace had existed at that time; provided that the Lacanian proposal "The Name of the Father" is accepted (Pommier, 2005, pp. 71). If the real keeps its doors open is precisely for its definition the real is what resists any nomination what would place the virtual scene beyond any definite solution of that real, it is a new form to produce the imaginary and tends to restore unity without any symbolic obstacles. The virtual evidently transforms productions into culture, thus transforming the law which is the spectrum of identity attempts by the individual who pretends to escape the symbolic (Pommier, 2005).

This study results from a documented research, which was actively applied when creating some Avatars in Second Life. This experience tried to contrast some of the most important Lacanian psychoanalysis statements and concepts, such as The Other, Saussure's linguistic foundation and RSI, showing the subject's determination to interact with other subjects in virtual environments through linguistic structure. A specific application of a metaverse game in 3D as Second Life was used, where Avatars structured by virtual images of electronic written language represent subjects.

This research uses methodologically the virtual ethnographic, a ethnographic's variant that can be used in order to realise empirical studies in internet, for the cultures or virtual society studies, as the Second Life case. Here people tend to act and to interact in a different way like people normally do it, creating so a different world with their manners and ways. The field job in this case consists to create a character or Avatar at the environment to study and surf through different possibilities that they offer, while they interact with other Avatars.

An Avatar is a representative of a real person in the virtual world. The word is derived from the Sanskrit. Specifically related to Second Life is an avatar, the character that can be dressed and moved (Rymaszewski et ál. 2007). According to Stephen (2008) Avatars are interactive, come in different dimensions, and-like people-they view the world from different perspectives. Sometimes an avatar is a photo, sometimes it's a drawing; it can be based on a real person's appearance or look nothing like them. Usually avatars are a mix of the real and the imagined. They represent an Internet user.

Avatars interact in simulated environments, characterized by the simultaneous presence of multiple users who inhabit within the same simulated space. The computer-simulated world typically appears similar to the real world, with real world rules such as gravity, topography, locomotion, real-time actions, and communication. Over the last few years, the number of virtual world users has increased dramatically, and today, Second Life, the largest 3-D online digital world, boasts some 12 million subscribers. 3-D virtual worlds can be considered as 3-D social networks, where people can collaborate to create and edit objects (like a collaborative 3-D wiki space) besides meeting each other and interacting with existing objects (Gorini, Gaggioli, Vigna, & Riva, 2008).

Second Life grew out of the vision of the 'Metaverse' described in Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*. "Stephenson was the first to describe an online environment [The Metaverse] that was a real place to its users, one where they interacted using the real world as a metaphor and socialized, conducted business and were entertained" (Ondrejka, 2004, p. 81). According to Jones (2006), the developers of Second Life think that the Metaverse is a space where anyone can create and build an avatar body and dreamlike places, a world that will functions as "real", transcending the bounds of flesh and circumstance of the actual, tangible world.

A Representation of the Lacanian Big Other

Lacan (1995) said that at least two other have to be recognized, one with capital (A), and other with small (a), which is the ego. The word's function is the Other as a starting point to questions like: what do we

know about the ego? Is the ego real? Is it a mood? Is it another imaginary construction? Thus, Lacan proposes the following scheme.

Figure 1. The Other (A) Representation
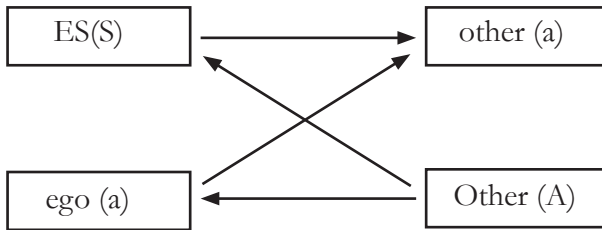
In Figure 1, (a') is a small other similar to the subject as an imaginary representation of the ego (a). Given this, it processes the determination of the ego and makes impossible the symbolic movement of the subject's desire through the other. Hence, the Big other or the Other (A) appears determined by the symbolic form of the subject's unconscious and desire. Thus, Lacan proposes the subject's division and the subject's possibility to efface itself ($), the desire interacts in the Other (A).

The subject (s) is not wholly due to the radical interaction through language since birth or even before that, the subject was never total. The subject is constructed by the other from its interaction with the other (a') through language, and the subject unfeasible determines itself in the other, so the possibility of a subject being determined and built by itself could only be possible with the existence of the imaginary ego (a). Accordingly, the language is plain, a barrier or curtain where the participants' imaginary-real-imaginary is recreated in the interaction. Although Lacan transforms one of Saussure's fundamental elements, he recognizes the importance of them, the sign constitution for a signifier and signified. To Lacan "The registers of the symbolic and the imaginary recur in the two other terms in which he expresses the structure of language, namely, the signified and the signifier" (Lacan, 1997, p. 56). Time is an important variable in the Lacanian linguistic approach: "When he speaks, the subject has the entire material of language at his disposal,

and this is where concrete discourse begins to be formed. Firstly, there is a synchronic whole, which is language as a simultaneous system of structured groups of opposition, and then there is what occurs diachronically, over time, which is discourse. One cannot but give discourse a certain direction in time, a direction that is defined in a linear manner, M. de Saussure tell us"(Lacan, 1997). Lacan analyses Saussure's dynamic process of the signified formation, "The signified is not the things in their raw state, already there, given in an order open to meaning. M. Saussure in his famous courses on linguistics produces a diagram with one flux that is the meaning and another that is the discourse, what we hear" (Lacan, 1997, p. 114). Postmodernism has unsuccessfully tried to silence the signification replacing the sense with the discourse, pursuing the closure of the Kantian critical subject, the Freudian neurotic subject and the Marxian revolutionary subject. The separation of signifier and signified is possible in a determined moment, but not in the same moment, especially in the spoken language, by the unexpected character of the sense (Lacan, 1997). While the written language electronic media facilitate the separation, being slower communication between subjects.

The subject (s) in terms of Lacan is determined by the other (a´) only in the real world, to move to the virtual world, it is necessary to define the concept of virtuality and its relation to reality. Unfortunately the cyberspace and the virtuality did not exist in Lacan epoch. The Real, Symbolic and Imaginary (R.S.I), con be supplemented as the Virtual (V) In this context, the virtual is not real but is much more than the imaginary to a subject and it is now. This change occurs in a specific time and space, in the virtual world we cannot speak about matter, but if there is an action that creates an effect on a phenomenon that could be possibly real.

In cyberspace has developed in the last years, the quality of the communication of data, computer programs, interfaces, web 2.0 tools and speed have allowed great development of 3D virtual worlds, and although still technology has not allowed a total immersion. Different authors like Yang & Lester (2004), Chia-Chi (2008), Hwiman & Euijin (2007), McLellan (2000), McKenna & Bargh (2000) among others, have published research on effects and psychological impacts generated by

the use of the technology, internet and electronic games in the subjects. Liang Zhang, Liu & Krokos (2008) have tried to prove the relation of real physical aspects with virtual ones when creating an Avatar. Other authors, such as Feldon & Kafai (2008) quantitatively found meaningful relations between subject's actions in the real world and social actions of Avatars in virtual worlds, the context and desires of the real world are the basis for interaction in the virtual world. Subjects perceive when they enter a virtual environment that the sensation of being trapped could depend on elements such as imagination, competition and the Avatars' activeness. Those factors depend upon the subject's experience in the virtual environment, perhaps on its background, personal history, habits, fears, etc.; and the inexperienced tend to feel sensations that lead them to continue their lives in the virtual environment (Jacobson, 2001). Others (Yang & Lester, 2004, p. 90), have found that "online shoppers have stronger positive feelings than do non-shoppers, while online non-shoppers have stronger negative feelings than do shoppers." According to Chia-Chi (2008, p. 326), for consumers "The high level of customer control unique to ecommerce warranted exploration of the effect of providing multiple recovery options to customers and its impact on customer's perceived control" For Second Life members, multiple options in the perception of other members exist in their avatar creation.

Regarding Hwimanand & Euijin (2007, p. 750), "Therefore, it can be reasonably argued that a relationship should exist between interactivity and attitude, memory, and behavior. Control refers to the content, timing, and sequence of a communication act, searching out alternative choices". Concerning McLellan (2000, p. 63), "Technology in the form of sophisticated, dynamic computer graphics makes this kind of innovation possible but interactive media of all kinds offer potential for guests to explore enticing places and engage in compelling challenges, including cognitive and imaginative challenges". About McKenna & Bargh, (2000, p. 57), "More important, for personality and social psychology, the Internet is a place where people are engaging in social interaction. Indeed, the number one use of the Internet at home is for interpersonal communication". These can be some examples of research on the effect of the virtual in the subjects. The virtual built from the subjectivity of each subject, can materialize some dreams that the real cannot.

The methodology for this research was virtual ethnography. Through participant observation of the researchers during the preparation, creation of the avatar, avatar manipulation and report the observation of each of the four Avatars created exclusively for this research by different subjects. The observation time was one month where activities were recorded for each Avatar. Carlos Tamatzui has been created as my Avatar in Second Life. He is a 22-year-old Colombian man, a series of possibilities have been offered to satisfy my desires since his creation in this "metaverse". Through Carlos Tamatzui, we can fly, surf, snowboard, take off on an aircraft or magic carpet, go to a concert, attend employment and university fairs, and create a new identity to be promoted from a desk job to a fashion designer position in sixty seconds. He can also buy or rent a mansion or flat, visit Italy, Japan, Germany, France, New York, Las Vegas or Brazil in minutes for just few Linden dollars.

At the same time, three additional Avatars were created. Avatar one Andrea Galuptra, a 28-year-old Italian blond woman. Avatar two Miguel Deezul, a 38-year-old Nigerian dark man. And Avatar three, Consuelo Pralau, a 22-year-old Spanish white woman. In their first month of life, different activities were done in Second Life. Each Avatar's characteristics were being structured, as the interaction with other Avatars occurred, through electronic written language and using various interfaces of the Second Life client program. While we were having communication with other Avatars by two of our avatars, we experienced personally the different sensations. The Avatars they allowed some of our desires, in some cases throughout the study. It is possible to pose with these results that there is a relationship where The Other (A) is greater than the Avatar (A '), both real and virtual, because there are some desires that the subject does not want to recreate in the virtual.

Figure 2 shows how Avatars were created in Second Life for this research using physical features such as skin color, figure, hair color and type, clothes and other elements like jewelry, sexual organs, glasses, etc. Through these Avatars, it was possible to freely visit Gnubie, a store where several objects, jewels and colored shoes are exhibited. Also, Sarah Nerd's Newbie Paradise a shop where new Avatars are oriented about their activities and other experiences. There the inexistent boundaries

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allow these identities to interact with others and fulfill various desires that could not be feasible in the real world.

Figure 2. Created Avatars for Research

Carlos Tamatzui   Andrea Galuptra   Miguel Deezul   Consuelo Pralau

**Source:** Adapted from http://www.secondlife.com

The virtual is not the real for what it allows to achieve, and it is not the imaginary for the possibilities of action. Then, the subject is not the same in the real and the virtual. But it could be feasible in the virtual reality, for instance to manipulate the content of interactive tools and the induction of specific emotional answers through the participation of "metaverses". It is especially possible to induce a sensation of "presence" in the world generated by a computer and experimented by the subject represented by its Avatar. Second Life has become an emotional outcome, showing a relationship between the presence and emotions (Riva et ál., 2007).

Online games as Second Life have a direct impact on the lifestyles of those subjects who created Avatars, translating their behavior patterns and desires to the virtual world. These lifestyles could be oriented to the Avatar, the community and player and contrary to the subject's real world. Even the socio-economic situation could be reflected in the virtual world which is built through games and provides the possibility to create new social identities (Leo Sang-Min & Geunyoung, 2004).

Virtual representations of real subjects could take place in several forms, it could create as many Avatars as this subject wants and communicate with the same real subject through one of its Avatars thinking that they are various real subjects. A real subject could communicate through several Avatars in real time in the same moment via the same or various electronic games or using synchronic and asynchronous games. This asynchronous communication takes place when an email is written, at that instant there is no direct communication with another subject, the sender sends it in a specific time while the receiver finds it when checking its inbox providing the time for replying to that message. The synchronic communication occurs when two people interact through a simultaneous dialogue in a specific time, the sender and receiver exchange information in real time, some examples are online games, video-conferences, Ip-voice, instant messages and chat rooms.

Both Avatars and Lacanian subjects are structured by the interaction with other peers, which is also done through the use of language with the construction of signs and signifiers, first in the virtual and second in the real. Regarding language, the virtual allows the real to materialize the Other (A) in which real actions only exist in the virtual. This Avatar is known as A', capital A', different to the other (a') and the Other (A), because it is the materialization of desire from the real, in the virtual. For instance the satisfaction of desires and acquisition of money (Linden Dollar) could become real dollars. figura 3 shows the evolution of the Other (A) in the virtual como Avatar (A').

Figure 3. The Avatar (A´) Representation
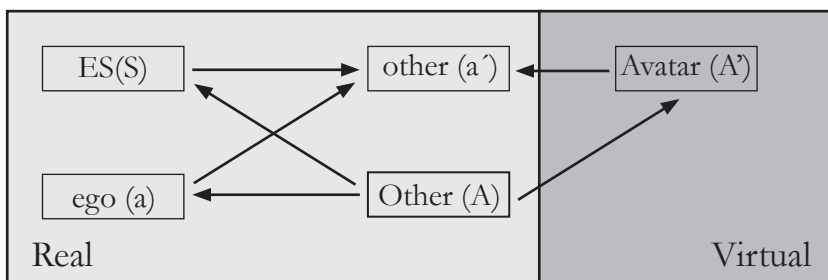
Source: Adapted from Lacan (1997).

According to Lacan (1995), the reduction of the Other is provided by the word, the other imaginary, this substitution of the symbolic for the imaginary. Even the conception of the effect of total strangeness in moments of closure produced from delirious dialogues, which psychotics could only sustain inwards, is known as the subject's intransitivity, where as every thing seems natural to us, saying intransitivity "I think, therefore I am". The disappearance of that duality is precisely what makes difficult for the psychotic to become human that is a real symbol.

The virtual is mediating the descent from the symbolic to the imaginary. That intermediation is able to open spaces to the subject to become more individual according to its will. This may be the starting point to argue that the real into the symbolic, not imaginary, but virtual. Thinking virtual limitless as: time, confirmation of identity and the ability to do anything. While the Other (A) is the symbolic order, the Avatar (A´) is the virtual order. Both are significant subject, with the difference that the Other (A) in the real the subject is not complete, but the Avatar (A') in the virtual allows correctly. The other (a') relates to the imaginary order and is considered a peer; it will always be imaginary, regardless possibilities of being materialized as real. Accepting the concept of R.S.I.V is feasible to materialize the Other (A) in the virtual (V). The materialization could reach the subject's fulfillment represented in the Other (A) through concrete virtual actions. The Other (A) is characterized as a flaw in desire and only the symbolic order remains, Lacan (1962, p. 19) mentioned that the "Other is the one who sees me", in which my desire is interested. Thus, the unconscious existence makes subjects desire endlessly but they possess a limited action in their reality. This symbolic representation of desire in the real, can be realized by the subject in the virtual, but the usage of an Avatar could fulfill that desire through an electronic linguistic representation which shows the subject's characterization. Most of cases, the subject tries to accomplish its desire in the "metaverse" and fade itself through the creation of an Avatar.

Even for Lacan something was missing in the Other "That in which the Other may discover itself as the Other of the Other. The Other of the Other only exists as a place. It finds its place even if we cannot find it anywhere in the real, even if all we can find to occupy this place in the

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real is simply valid insofar as it occupies this place, but cannot give it any other guarantee than that it is in its place". (Lacan, 1992, p.66).The Avatar could possibly be what Lacan determined as the missing part in the Other and could be found in the virtual. The Lacanian subjectivity can be developed in 3D virtual environments like Second Life because it allows the materialization of the subject's desires, taking into account that a virtual environment is a hundred percent editable, malleable and impossible to calculate using each Avatar if the pulsional discharge guarantees fulfillment of the subject's desire. Technology generates new spaces for the subject's symbolic interactions to subjectively build in the virtual each one of the Avatar's identities. In the virtual, the subject lives subjectively a second existence, the number of existences will depend upon on the number of Avatars in Second Life or other virtual environments. Ontologically, each Avatar (A´) is created by a subject, is determined by the expression of their subjectivity from the Other (A). In future research it is possible to analyze the consequences for understanding subjectivity and the relationship between the signifier and the signified.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Many virtual worlds exist on the Internet; some of them are games, business services or virtual education. The subjects have the possibility to create different Avatars for each one of them or even diverse Avatars in one of those virtual worlds. Neither it is possible to calculate how many Avatars exist online regardless of the fact that they are created in personal computers without connection to internet or videogames, nor is it possible to find the average of Avatars that a real subject has. This could have multiple Avatars in diverse virtual worlds. The interaction between Avatars could be synchronic or a synchronic. The language as a structural source for the subject has major changes and implications when communication and its usage are made in Internet in an electronic text. The sign, signified and signifier obtain an interaction with the subject and its representations acquiring a linguistic value different to the proposals from the spoken language as a linguistic fundament. Both Avatars and Lacanian subjects are structured in the interaction with their peers, and this is made through the language using the construction of

signs and signifiers, first in the virtual and second in the real, allowing the materialization of the Other (A).

Many of the basic concepts in Lacan's psychoanalytic proposal, taking into account the subjectivity and linguistic of argumentative fundamentals, could be reconsidered, contrasted or adapted to 3D virtual worlds as Second Life. The importance of this type of research resides in how actual the topic is, but especially in social and psychological impact that has shown in the last few years. The real, the imaginary and the symbolic established by Lacan have the virtual as a complement. The virtual lack in Lacan's theory, to materialize the Other (A) represented by the Avatar (A ').. Thus, the Lacanian Subject is a representation of the real structured from linguistics focused in the spoken language, whereas the Avatar is an image of the virtual structured from the digital characterization focused on the electronic text. An Avatar visits a virtual world because it uses a body that only exists in the metaverse, which is a 3D virtual universe parallel to reality. Using an Avatar, a creator feels what is happening to its representation in the metaverse through the Avatar's information.

In Lacan, both the father's name as the ghost are part of the signifier in the symbolic, independent of the real and the imaginary. Although it was not part of this research, it is possible to argue that both can create if you are related to a specific desire, in the virtual.

Although Lacan did not suggest a totalized subject, he proposed a divided one whose representation is being structured by each interaction with its peers in the real, the imaginary or the symbolic as (a), (a') or (A). The current research tried to propose and sustain that due to the Internet's social and psychological impact, the virtual also exists where a representation of an Avatar named (A')is made because it is the evolution of the Other (A).

Future research could be studied using qualitative and quantitative methods in certain populations, studying how several subjects pretend to efface themselves through the creation of Avatars in Second Life.

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