

The Death of a User: Consequences on Avatars and Digital Content

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Abstract:

The embodiment of a user through an avatar and its phenomenological experiences are considered relevant and real in a synthetic environment. In addition to this fact, an increasing number of users operate in multiple virtual worlds for online interaction of all kinds. As users create various personal connections and contribute content to these 3D spaces, the prevalence of online personal presence increases, along with the amount of personal information and content contained in these environments. As online identities are infused with every day “real” lives, the interactions and usages of avatars can have consequences far beyond its usual 3D representation. Virtual worlds such as Second Life® depend on the creation of content and contributions by its users or residents, to contribute to the diversity and richness of the environment. User generated content, creativity and the creation of a sense of community is encouraged, thus strengthening virtual connections. The online representations that interact in these worlds are not simply artifacts that remain in these online environments. However, these social interactions and experiences can have an impact on other users as well as manifesting both positive and negative repercussions in real life. For example, as these social interactions include activities in the areas of entertainment, education, exploration and increasingly related to virtual businesses, these elements can influence our real lives and vice versa.

It is becoming, for many users, a blurred boundary between real world activities and online activities. Due to the linking of real world activities via virtual worlds, new concerns are introduced. For example what would happen to our digital content and online identities if something happens to the user? In this paper, the authors will address several concerns regarding what happens to a user’s information and identity in a virtual world when the user in real life dies. In addition, this paper will highlight our preliminary examination into the effect of death on user created content and how this can create problems. It is important to consider our virtual creations, connections and information as part of our virtual legacies. It is the position of the

authors, that users should view their avatars the same as they view their real-life personas in this regard if they are concerned about their digital creations. In approaching this position, we briefly discuss virtual memorialization and offer suggestions on protecting and preserving users' personal virtual content for the future. The authors will present current research in this area, as well as discussing future work and goals. Even though the topic and discussion of death is not a pleasant one, it is a very real concern to online content, particularly with virtual worlds.