

# Intertwining Identities: Why There is No Escaping Physical Identity in the Virtual World

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## Abstract

Understanding identity requires understanding the communities to which we belong; virtual communities are increasingly relevant to our personal identity. While many point to alleged differences of behavior and presentation online, these are not as great as first appear; characteristics which encourage antisocial behavior online do so offline as well. Furthermore, while deception and alteration of identity are possible online, they are difficult to sustain and rooted in our understanding of physical identities. Thus while there is space between our physical and virtual representations, the two are not sharply separated. Anonymity is often used to argue for such a separation, however while there is sufficient anonymity to allow for deceptive portrayals online, it is harder to attain than most realize. I discuss ways of piercing anonymity online and possible future ramifications of our increasing ability to do so. Less anonymity will likely lead to greater responsibility for our online actions, but it also will diminish our ability to use virtual worlds for identity experimentation. I discuss positive and negative effects of the increasing connection between virtual and physical identities.

## 1 Introduction

Traditionally, many philosophical views of personality have considered the individual without social context. The paradigm of this approach is John Locke (1979), who opened the gates for a flood of cases involving amnesia and body-swapping. These examples focus on the individual and the specific parameters of the thought-experiment; they do not look at how one's identity is shaped by other people or by social forces.

Other approaches to personal identity have placed a much greater emphasis on the relationship between one's self and other factors. G. W. F. Hegel (1931), for instance, emphasized that our identities do not form in a vacuum. Rather, our identity is created in relation to another – it is only when we face and are challenged by another self-consciousness that our identity truly emerges. As such, we cannot consider a person's identity without considering her relation to others.

George Herbert Mead (1967) perhaps stated it most strongly in claiming that "Selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves...The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group." (p. 164) Yet, of course, it is not simply that we must consider individuals in relation to other individuals. As Mead notes, we belong to social groups, and frequently we are seen not as a single individual but as a member of a group.

If our selves are shaped by the relationships we have to others in our social group, then a full understanding of our identities must include discussion of these social factors. Our understanding of race, nationality, and so forth is germane to our understanding of identity – we are shaped by the

communities we belong to. With the rise of online social interactions, we must consider how our identity is affected by the virtual world.

Online interactions are fascinating philosophically for a number of reasons. The prospect of anonymity online, for instance, seems to suggest that our actions in the virtual world can be divorced from our offline selves; this raises questions about the effect of anonymity on our online actions and representations. Furthermore, virtual communities differ from many traditional kinds of communities; it is worth asking how these differences affect our identities.

Before delving more deeply into how identity works in the virtual world, an important caveat is required: virtual communities are not univocal. We can interact online in a plethora of ways, ranging from online discussion forums and blogs to creating avatars in *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*. While no single feature characterizes all online interactions or communities, we can roughly categorize them based on how identity is treated within that community. Richard C. MacKinnon introduces a system of understanding the relationship between a user and their personae (or avatars) online:

A representation is transparent when the user attempts to represent him or herself as he or she is; a representation is translucent when the Usenet persona is only a shadow of the user; and accordingly, a representation is opaque when the persona does not resemble the user at all. (MacKinnon 1995, p. 118)

For example, if I were to maintain a personal blog in which I chronicled my life with little distortion or embellishment, that representation would be transparent. If I created an avatar in *Second Life* with many of my characteristics, but perhaps concealed some of my insecurities or physical disabilities, then that representation would be translucent; it retains some of my characteristics, but it changes or omits some of them as well. Lastly, if I represent myself as wholly different – perhaps impersonating someone of another race and gender – then my representation is opaque.

I will argue that it is our online representations are not completely opaque. There are certainly differences in how our identities are presented in virtual and physical communities. There are even differences in how identity works in different kinds of virtual communities, some of which may prove important for our understanding of identity. However, there is less separation between online and offline identities than people often think: our online identities always stem from our offline identities and, as such, are never truly independent of them. Our identities are not separable – they are inextricably intertwined.

## 2 The Relationship Between Online and Offline Selves

A key question concerning online identity is how separable it is from our offline identity – could we have two quite different identities? There are two main reasons we often give an affirmative answer to this question. First, people are thought to act very differently online than offline. Second, people sometimes present or represent themselves differently online than offline. I will consider each of these in turn, arguing that in fact our identities are entwined.

First, consider the notion that people act differently online than they do offline. There has been a great deal of discussion, notably by John Suler (Suler 2004; Suler & Phillips 1998), of the fact that people are generally more willing to harm others online than offline. For instance, people engage in behavior such as "trolling," wherein they deliberately try to upset or anger people online for their own entertainment. Likewise, people will use offensive language online fairly casually, even if they might not be willing to use such speech in person. On a more benign note, people are also often willing to

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\* There is also an interesting question about whether we have a single online identity; I believe we do, but space does not permit a full elaboration of the point.

reveal information online which they might not share as easily in person; there is a level of trust that seems to build more freely in virtual interactions.

In each of these cases, the user has a sense of separation between herself and her behavior. In the antisocial case, the user either does not see the harm she has caused or does not pay a price for causing it. Similarly, the direct risk a user runs by revealing personal information online is relatively low. Despite these points, I am not convinced that this represents a substantial change from offline behavior; humans are quite capable of failing to pay attention to suffering which is far away, for instance. Our ability to ignore the harm caused by our actions online is akin to our ability to ignore the harm caused by sweatshops in third world countries. The lack of empathy for people online mirrors that displayed for people we view as lesser in the physical world.

The question of responsibility for harm caused online is interesting. One factor to note is that we tend to attribute more anonymity to our online activities than they actually have. As Hua Qian and Craig Scott (2007) discuss, while many individuals know not to post their names and addresses online, they are less careful with photos and other visual indicators of their identities and locations. Moreover, as we see in work by Rong Zheng et al. (2006), we are increasingly able to identify people across virtual communities from relatively short samples of their writings. Hence our ability to elude identification and responsibility for our online actions is not as easy as we might think.

In addition, responsibility and punishment do not necessarily require a physical presence. There has been increasing interest in justice with respect to online interactions, and both Farnaz Alemi (2008) and Marcus Johansson (2009) note that people need not be punished in the physical world in order to face consequences. Indeed, it may be more effective to punish some virtual crimes in the virtual world; being publically shamed in an online community one has wronged may be more appropriate than being forced to pay a fine, say. This will not deter everyone, of course; if one has no attachment to the community, one is unlikely to feel shamed by any public discipline. Rather, this focus underscores two key facts. One, I need not be able to link your virtual actions to a physical person in order for you to face consequences; anonymity is not an escape from all punishment. Two, the online forums in which people act badly towards each other are likely to be those to which they have little attachment, not those where they intend to stay. In physical communities, you do not litter in your neighbors' yards if you desire good relations with them. Similarly, you will not troll in a virtual community you wish to be valued in.

In sum, I do not find a great discrepancy in behavior between online and offline communities. While there are certainly cases of bad behavior online, they mimic the callous treatment of people perceived as lesser in the physical world; the online world may exacerbate our ability to dehumanize others, but it does not create that ability. Similarly, our willingness to engage in antisocial behaviors online is simply an expression of a trait that is already present in us, namely, a belief that certain behaviors are acceptable when the stakes are low or when we do not believe we will be punished. The lack of responsibility many feel for their actions online will likely dwindle as we devise appropriate responses to antisocial behavior online; as such, I expect that the gap between permissible online and offline behaviors will shrink over time.

The second basis for arguing that online and offline identities are separable was that people present themselves differently online. Indeed, the literature contains a plethora of both lamentations and celebrations of our ability to present ourselves in different ways in the virtual world. Two of the most interesting examples are our ability to gender-switch, i.e., portray ourselves as being of a different gender than we actually are, and our ability to hide disabilities and thus not have our identities reduced to them. While the former has undoubtedly had more coverage in the popular press, the latter seems to be one of great hope to many.

A major obstacle to seeing a kinship between online and offline identity is the belief that you can change who you are online in a way you cannot offline –you can pretend to be a woman from London when you are a man from Boise. There is a frequent worry that the person you are interacting with online cannot be trusted to be as they appear. There are two things worth noting in response to this

concern. First, we play with our identity offline as well. We frequently try out different ways of dressing, speaking, and interacting with people. Indeed, many have noted (Simpson 2005; Turkle 2004; Crowe and Bradford 2006) that this is a natural part of child development; however, this does not end with childhood. The prevalence of New Year's Resolutions and self-help books indicates that we often yearn to change ourselves in various ways. Our desired alterations may be less drastic than changing our gender, but they indicate that neither our identity nor how we portray it in the physical world is static.

Second, while it might be easy to deceive someone about small matters, such as making minor adjustments to your age, large deceptions are difficult to sustain. Anyone can claim to be of a different race or gender online, but maintaining the illusion takes hard work. A convincing portrayal of another's experience goes beyond simply stating that they have a set of characteristics. An author who seeks to write a character with a different background than his own must work hard to sound authentic. Similarly, maintaining a deceptive online identity will also require work to be convincing.

The issue of sustaining identity in the virtual world raises the point that personal identity online is always based in the physical world. Simpson (2005) and Crowe and Bradford (2006) note that, no matter how you are portraying yourself, that portrayal has a genesis. If you are representing yourself as a different gender, you must obtain your image of that gender from somewhere. Men and women are socialized differently in our society, resulting in different speech patterns, socially acceptable conversational topics, etc. No one possesses innate knowledge of how the other gender acts; hence that knowledge must come from one's observations, stereotypes, past interactions, and so forth.

The virtual world is also not free of the social biases and beliefs from the physical world. Even if you specify yourself as having a particular gender or race, you may well not be believed. We commonly see denials of others' gender in video games, but disbelief is encountered in other contexts as well. Diane Carr (2010) discusses that even if you choose to disclose your disability status, you may well not be believed; women also are often asked to "prove" that they are female online (Reingold 1993). The social expectations and stereotypes of the physical world impact both what people choose to portray and how that portrayal is received.

Physical identities thus directly affect online identities in two ways. First, people's portrayals of identities are based on real life experiences of identity. Second, others' evaluations of your identity claims are based on their understandings of physical identities and on their pre-existing social biases. Thus a mere claim of being a woman living in London will not necessarily suffice to pass as one. People will evaluate that claim based on how you match up to their perception of what such a woman would be like. Your success depends on understanding that identity in the physical world and translating it into the virtual world, as well as on being sufficiently convincing to overcome any presumptions of identity.

### 3 Whence Anonymity?

We have established that our online identity is rooted in real life; we cannot cleanly divorce the virtual world from the physical world. Yet, a critic may still object that there is surely some disconnect between our physical and virtual identities due to our ability to remain anonymous online. This provides a kind of isolation (and thus security) that we lack in most of our physical actions.

In order to address this, we should distinguish two senses of anonymity. First, we can take someone to be anonymous online if we cannot link their online actions to an offline identity; we will call this weak anonymity. Second, we can take someone to be anonymous online if none of their actions can be linked either to each other or to a physical person; we will call this strong anonymity. Which of these do users tend to seek?

Online gaming provides prime examples of weak anonymity. In these cases, a user's actions are attributed to their character, but most other users are unable to link that character to a physical person. Despite the disconnect from a particular physical person, the user may have a robust online identity; their actions are all being attributed to the same source, even if they cannot be linked to a particular physical person. Frequently weak anonymity is all that people seek. Indeed, as MacKinnon (1995) and Parsell (2008) discuss, reputation is often taken to be quite important online; since we lack the usual social cues on which we base our opinions of people, we often rely on reputation. The actions attributed to a particular avatar or username are often all we have to establish that reputation, giving them an important place in identity-creation online.

Strong anonymity is much more difficult to obtain than weak anonymity, in part because our technical resources for tracing the origin of online communications are increasing. Zheng et al. (2006) note that it is much easier to link writing samples than we think; similarly, we are increasingly able to track IP addresses across communities. Your identity across online sources is difficult to mask unless you keep your contributions very short and can mask where you are posting from. It is also not clear how often this kind of anonymity is sought. Although one might think that strong anonymity would be desired in instances where people are engaging in anti-social behavior, Suler (1998) notes that even in these circumstances people often seek some kind of identity; while being weakly anonymous, they often have a calling card or style that identifies instances of behavior as theirs.

As such, weak anonymity seems to be the mostly commonly sought type of anonymity. However, it suffices to raise questions about how intertwined our physical and virtual identities are. While there are strong connections between our physical and virtual identities, weak anonymity is sufficient to create a gap between them. Our online and offline identities are thus intertwined, not indistinguishable.

It is worth noting that even weak anonymity is more difficult to obtain than we often realize; our online trails are becoming easier for others to follow. This erosion of online anonymity is a mixed blessing. As people become aware that their actions are traceable, there will likely be a lessening of anti-social behavior. However, there is a downside as well. The virtual world has great potential to aid our attempts to figure out who we are. While I have argued that our online identities are rooted in the physical world, I follow Martin (2004) and Savin-Baden (2010) in noting the place of possible identities, not simply current ones. If a person wishes to be a bit more outgoing and assertive, he can try it out online. There is thus currently a kind of safe space online for previewing these identity changes. Since online interactions are increasingly archived, the decrease in anonymity may result in an identity which can be traced across online communities and across many years.

There is thus a certain loss of freedom inherent in the piercing of anonymity. Whereas once a small town pariah could start over in a new city, now her embarrassment can be preserved on YouTube forever. This is inhibiting to identity creation – if we worry too much about how an action will appear to others or in the future, then it is hard to see ourselves as undergoing an authentic process of self-understanding. It is possible new safeguards will emerge, but at the moment the potential consequences are troubling.

## 4 Conclusion

To truly understand our identities, we must consider the communities we belong to and our interactions with others; since the virtual world is increasingly a part of our lives, our online interactions must be included. I have argued that our virtual and physical identities are tightly intertwined. The touted differences of behavior and presentation online are not as great as they appear; the same characteristics that encourage antisocial behavior online do so in the physical world.

Furthermore, while deception is possible online, it is both difficult to sustain and rooted in our conceptions and understanding of the physical world. As such, while there is space between our physical and virtual representations, the two are not sharply divided; our virtual personae are translucent, not opaque.

Furthermore, while weak anonymity does suffice to allow for deceptive portrayals, it is harder to attain than many think; our ability to cross-reference samples of text or visual identifiers is eroding our current anonymity. In the future, we may need to be more careful online, as we will likely be held more responsible than at present. This may serve to bring our physical and virtual actions in line with each other, although at a certain price: our ability to use virtual worlds for identity experimentation will diminish.

Steven G. Jones writes that “the Internet is not a social world unto itself... it is part and parcel of a social world.” (Jones 1997, p. 30) The same is true of virtual identity. Our online identities are not creations unto themselves, untouched by the physical world. Rather, they too are products of that world. They may reflect who we are, who we would like to be, or our perceptions of what it is like to be someone else. But they are bound always to ourselves and our particular social context – the virtual and the physical identities ever intertwined.

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