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Cyber Souls and Second Selves

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

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Abstract

This project explores the relationship between the real self and digital identity (mostly in the form of avatars in life simulation video games) and how these two states of being could possibly merge and act as one. This dossier consists of three chapters. The first chapter is an extended artist statement and a summary of influences in my work. There I explore the tangible relationship between player and avatar and how digital experiences affect our psyches in various contexts where this relationship is developed and maintained. The second chapter is an interview with Mohawk multimedia artist, Skawennati, who discusses how she developed different principles for analyzing online experiences and platforms, and how she represents human subjects in the online game world through avatars. Chapter three contains documentation of artworks I produced throughout my MFA candidacy, accompanied by a brief description explaining the contexts and concepts behind those works.

Summery for Lay Audience

In this paper, I examine a state in which lived experience comes from both virtual space and physical space. Since the extended relationship between the real self and virtual self goes beyond cyberspace and into one's everyday life, it forms a unique identity attached to both virtual and physical worlds.

Keywords

Virtual Reality, Cyberspace, Video Game, Avatar, Digital Identity, Online Character, Memory, Lacan, Skawennati.

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Preface

This project explores my experience of personal presence as it is embodied in the digital world. When I enter digital space, I become stuck in this other space, sometimes for a long time, and then, as I pull myself out, this other space leaves its traces on me.

In my artwork, I imagine a state in which lived experience comes from both virtual space and physical space. This state relies on the primary concept that the core of psychic life takes place in a virtual reality, where each of us is a subject of ‘imagination.’ If this is the case, ideas of ‘self’ and ‘place’ are indispensable to this argument. The self within a digital version of this virtual reality is identified as an ‘avatar’ or ‘second self.’ ‘Avatar’ here refers, as Dianna Baldwin and Julie Achterberg define it, to “the persona one creates for oneself when entering into a virtual environment. These are often customizable or can be changed completely.”¹ This virtual, second self exists in the context of cyber space where, digitally, virtual interactions take place (for example in 3D virtual worlds and online video games).

Theoretically, a screen acts as a mediator to generate the distancing effect between our physical and digital selves; however, this effect dissolves away after virtual immersion. Dislocating our bodies from the physical world can lead us to feel unobstructed, or free from the former dominance of real space. It can also free us from traditional concepts of bodies and thus alters the phenomenon of proprioception (our sense of self-movement and body position). We may also encounter changes in site-specific social constraints, as in virtual environments like those found in online open-world platforms and life simulation games that engage users in rich narratives. Immersion in online platforms encourages the prioritization of such concepts as ‘empathy,’ ‘telepresence,’ ‘liveness,’ ‘mind/body split debate,’ and

¹ Dianna Baldwin and Julie Achterberg, *Women and Second Life: Essays on Virtual Identity, Work and Play* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2013), 6.

participation. As digital experiences of gameplay become more and more prominent in everyday life, my artwork seeks to explore and engage with such concerns.

Chapter 1

1 Comprehensive Artist Statement

1.1 Self as an Imaginative Creation

The inception and forming of the self are first characterized by calibrating the mental representation of the body-self and the space it occupies (as referenced by Lacan's 'mirror theory').² Within ongoing mental representations of the body, spatial positionality emerges. The resulting understanding of self-versus-other and inside-versus-outside is manifested by delineating barriers and limits (both internal and external). Striking a balance between these two binary states or zones reifies identity, how we imagine ourselves, and how we expect to be comprehended. It seems to me, this idea is very similar to how we understand our virtual presence in the digital era, specifically in the form of an avatar or second self. The influence of virtual reality on the psyche shares similar qualities to the Lacanian understanding of the self.

According to Lacan, the self is something that we build: "The self must recuperate its subjectivity by first recognizing itself in the 'other,' thereby identifying with the other's recognition of itself. Our 'self' is an imaginative creation."³ Thereafter, "the imaginary becomes the internalized image of this ideal, whole, self and is situated around the notion of coherence rather than fragmentation."⁴ Lacan develops the Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the 'I' as revealed in psychoanalytic experience in order to describe the identification mechanism.

² Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus, editors, *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud: Seminar I, Freud's Papers on Technique, Seminar II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* (Albany State University of New York Press, 1996), 23.

³ Lacan in Feldstein, Fink, and Jaanus, *Reading Seminars I and II*, 11.

⁴ Feldstein, Fink, and Jaanus, *Reading Seminars I and II*, 114.

“In particular, this creation of an ideal version of the self gives pre-verbal impetus to the creation of narcissistic fantasies in the fully developed subject. That fantasy image of oneself can be filled in by others who we may want to emulate in our adult lives (role models, et cetera), and/or anyone that we set up as a mirror for ourselves.”⁵ Notably, mirrors allow us to see ourselves from the outside, and to objectify aspects of ourselves we had perceived only from within. In a broader sense, we become aware of our second selves within virtual experiences as a mirror of the mind.

Reflecting on one’s avatar, one becomes an outsider halfway into mirroring the experiences induced to (felt by) the avatar, and indeed the ‘self’ becomes an ambiguous entity whose actions and agency, and mode of influence can be debated. Accepting the mirror stage’s grounding as a continuous split between self-as-observer and self-as-observed, and that the video game is a reflection of this structure, the idea emerges that we already exist in avatariation relation to ourselves. Bob Rehak elaborates this concept in his text, *Playing at Being*:

...Our experience of the world itself is based on equal parts participation and spectatorship; we are certainly here, acting, but we do so in a constant tension between the illusory unity of self that our observing consciousness delivers to us, and the fragmented multiplicity of a self-riddled with unbridgeable gaps. Egos are founded on the assumption of wholeness, a wholeness misperceived in the form of

⁵ Aron Brudny and Angelina Demilhanova, “The Virtual Reality in a Context of the ‘Mirror Stage,’” *International Journal of Advances in Psychology* 15 (2012): 6-9.

a symbolic other. The other that functions retroactively to bestow authenticity on the self could be described as a living avatar.⁶

As so, the Lacanian idea of the Mirror Stage would be a valid context for analyzing the experience of observing and influencing one's avatar.

1.2 Being an Active Agent

In order to grasp the notion of the second self, it is important to outline what is meant by inner selves and external selves. Experience of our inner selves ranges from our interior understandings and life experiences to our virtual presence on virtual platforms. We experience our external selves in the non-virtual world by interacting with others and, as such, are subject to being delineated by them. This duality of internal and external selves can give us agency in the world around us while at the same time determining and limiting our autonomy. A virtual, second body offers the possibility of being a mediator to explore virtual reality. It gives us a second self, whereby we can share our internal experience, but portrayed through a second, external experience. This adventure is usually accessible through an avatar. According to John Bucher in his analysis of storytelling and virtual reality, "We have been given agency in a new and very realistic world. This new external virtual self is not yet made to live within the confines of natural or humanmade laws, such as the law of gravity or the penal code. Yet we will continue to establish our presence in this new reality by what we know and have experienced in the world we originated in."⁷

⁶ Bob Rehak, "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar," *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J.P. Wold and Bernard Perron (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), 123.

⁷ Bucher, John. *Storytelling for Virtual Reality: Methods and Principles for Crafting Immersive Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 98.

1.3 Fantasy as the Third Area

We inhabit a world of continuous duality, and finding a balance between them would be our circadian challenge. This difficulty relates to how we understand ourselves and how others interpret us. Our entity is divided between our being and our semblance of being. However, “there would be a third area of human living, one neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality.”⁸ The third area resides in the intermediary space between individual ‘inner life’ and social ‘outer life’ (their interface or surface), and appears as fantasy.

André Nusselder studies fantasy as the primary medium for the subject of desire. According to him, fantasy consists of the order of ‘images’ and that of ‘meaning’: “Because signifiers work in it, fantasy is more than a mirror-image or reflection of the real: it is also a (symbolic) construction of it. Such fantasmatic constructions of the real are at the heart of psychical reality. In the unconscious mind, fantasy therefore is the ‘script’ of the role that we play.”⁹

In this sense, providing ‘pleasure’ and ‘defensive mechanisms’ would be considered the fundamental functions and core purposes of fantasy. These functions attach fantasy to the body and its real environment. Here it is a necessity to define ‘real’ and its association with fantasy. Nusselder explains, “From a psychoanalytic point of view, the real is thought of as traumatic, as an unbearable affection that calls for

⁸ Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, reprint (London and New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 110.

⁹ André Nusselder, *The Surface Effect: The Screen of Fantasy in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

defensive mechanisms.”¹⁰ As a result, the fantasy-images that provide pleasure are, at the same time, a defense against what Lacan calls a traumatic state of enjoyment (*jouissance*). Thus, *jouissance* can only be approached through fantasy. In Lacan’s words, “The only moment of *jouissance* that man knows occurs at the site where fantasms are produced, fantasms that represent for us the same barrier as far as access to *jouissance* is concerned, the barrier where everything is forgotten.”¹¹ As such, the ‘image’ in fantasy covers several aspects, including pleasure and enjoyment, signification, and protection.

Consequently, fantasy emerges as an enduring medium in perception, recollection, and even in human understanding. This ‘third area’ is at the surface of the self, where the individual’s inner life and the outer world meet. In a broader sense, reality and illusion connect and link through experiencing a fantasy. For instance, let us conceive a situation in which we are aware that we write a ‘fantasy’ scenario and play the role of its main character.¹² We usually generate this situation by daydreaming, an illustrative example of the relation between the conscious and the unconscious. In such a conscious fantasy, it is still recognizable that the subject turns itself into a fantasy-object that it is not. We strive for and enact the most intimate representation of ourselves, and we enjoy playing this specific role in the fantasy world.

In this way, “fantasy is more than the result of an unsatisfactory reality. Such a frustration characterizes the neurotic; reality is so unsatisfying that the neurotic tries to compensate for it in [our] imaginary inside world of fantasies. Moreover, the psychotic

¹⁰ Nusselder, *The Surface Effect*, 3.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques Alain Miller, translated by Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), 298.

¹² Nusselder, *The Surface Effect*, 4.

goes a long way towards replacing the outside world by [our] fantasmatic fabrications.”¹³

I suggest that this involvement of fantasy and reality predetermines their intimate connection; they are not contrary, but corresponding.

1.4 The Subordinated Subject

Initially, concerns with how the subject becomes a subject revolve around how the subject is recognized by means of objects. Sherry Turkle lists these main concerns: “There is the power of boundary objects and the general principle that objects are active life presence... We often feel at one with our objects...[and] Objects are able to catalyze self-creation.”¹⁴ It becomes clear, though, that our agency is in fact subordinated by ‘objects’ and “our subject is the result of subordination.”¹⁵ Our avatar acts as the ‘object’ in this theory and undermines our relation to virtual experience, from the development of selfhood, to the absorption and attachment to the entity of the avatar we possessed. We are subordinated by our avatars. They do not just belong to us; we belong to them, and through this transubstantiation, our virtual characters can talk for us.

Let us imagine a situation in which I am exploring a virtual world with my avatar, ambling around in a phantasmal scenario with my avatar as the protagonist. This illusory experience might make me laugh or feel annoyed or uncomfortable. The question is, who is actually responding to this prompt, my virtual or my real self? The answer is probably ‘both.’ The two selves are intricately connected, and, I would argue, maybe even the same.

¹³ Nusselder, *The Surface Effect*, 4.

¹⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, 5.

¹⁵ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, First Edition (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 61.

Hence, virtual environments are the contexts in which we create and adopt our avatars. The formed fantasy within virtual reality acts as compensation for what social reality does not provide. An avatar, however, is shaped by how an individual sees herself within a social fabric with its own conditions. We reify the constructed mechanism associated with non-virtual reality; therefore, virtual reality has its own borders, limits, orders, and cultures that we have to follow, which is similar to experiences we face within non-virtual reality.

Virtual reality as a technological platform for human interaction is entirely linked to one's own self-image, resulting from a lifetime of experiences outside of virtual worlds. While virtual reality does allow for tremendous creativity and fantasy, we can never entirely escape ourselves. While the openness of choice in virtual reality offers the user an almost limitless range of possibilities, the roles we choose to inhabit, with our avatars, are inevitably affected by our real selves. There are always some parts in avatar creation that are imbedded in non-virtual reality commitments. Decisively, the avatar becomes such an intimate representation of what we think, seek and desire, it cannot act independently of our own true character. Surprisingly, "our journey within virtual reality goes both ways."¹⁶

1.5 The Narrative Language of Video games

In his text, *Popular Modernism and its Legacies*, Scott Ortolano offers a comprehensive take on meaning and digital narrative.¹⁷ He argues that meaning arises and changes with context, and that we may examine meaning in relation to social,

¹⁶ Baldwin, and Achterberg, *Women and Second Life*, 6.

¹⁷ Scott Ortolano, *Popular Modernism and Its Legacies: From Pop Literature to Video Games* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 247-253.

situational, and textual aspects of different circumstances. Contemporary debates in the social theory of video games have struggled with the idea of ‘meaning.’ Scholars have sought to define what meanings video games convey and, correspondingly, how they are supposed to be interpreted and perceived. When we read, we interpret. Through language, we acquire a deeper understanding of different hypotheses and concepts. But how do we understand video games when they are supposed to be *played*?

The fundamental system in video games consists of a series of unpredictable behaviors and consequences in response to guidelines and events within the game world. “Examining the meaning that players make of their virtual experiences will increase the literature on the complex interaction between players’ physical and virtual selves, and the unique subset of experiences related specifically to simulated life games, which could potentially produce insight into how this meaning-making can be used therapeutically with clients.”¹⁸

There must be something compelling the player to behave as she does, providing interaction and investment in the game itself. This thing must be quite eloquent and engaging, withholding then delivering some essential quality that the player desires most of all. This thing is the script, the tale, and the story.

1.6 Awareness and Action Instead of Flat Narratives

A player can be more susceptible to influence when immersed in a visual experience. This level of engagement can be achieved in a variety of ways. Our

¹⁸ Stark, Jessica C, “A Day in the Life of a Sim: Making Meaning of Video Game Avatars and Behaviors,” (PhD diss., Antioch University, 2017), 2.

willingness to be persuaded by an encounter becomes more likely if we feel we have had a uniquely personal, nuanced experience, and are not just a part of a programmed, flat narrative. Immersive content can be a convincing medium for persuasion, and indeed this is one of the things that VR (Virtual Reality) does best: “Because experience is one of the most significant factors in changing people’s minds, persuasion can be a natural goal with VR experiences. Motivating or inspiring the audience, as well as moving them to action, are all activities that fall within the domain of persuasion.”¹⁹

In this sense, interactive involvement is, arguably, an extremely effective means by which a player can not only re-experience a specific event but also share in the story as an active agent as opposed to as a witness or an outsider. In other words, online interactive experiences can turn potentiality into actuality, and materialize the utopian version of an interactive text by positioning the reader/addressee at the center of storytelling and in charge of occurrences and consequences.

1.7 Virtual Reality as a Place

I have argued that there is a connection between the real self and avatar, and that they share similar qualities. I have also argued that cyberspace and geographical space coexist to produce ‘hybrid space’ that combines the virtually real and the actually real. As Robert M. Kitchen explains, “. . . cyberspaces do not replace geographic spaces, nor do they destroy space and time. Rather cyberspaces coexist with geographic spaces providing a new layer of virtual sites.”²⁰ To further explore this claim, I will examine the

¹⁹ Bucher, *Storytelling for Virtual Reality*, 97.

²⁰ Robert M. Kitchen, “Towards Geographies of Cyberspace,” *Progress in Human Geography* 22, no. 3 (June 1998): 385–406.

place where the real self and avatar thrive and can be interpreted. This is a question of virtual reality as a place: how has cyberspace as a concept been transformed from one of 'non-place' to that of 'place'? How has it gained a convincing conceptual autonomy?

In considering these questions, I will outline the different properties that characterize 'place.' As Marc Augé asserts, "place is associated with several indispensable qualities, as it is identitarian (in the sense that marks the identity of those who live there), relational and historical."²¹ We can imagine a state in which we are able to apply these virtues to virtual spaces: "The concept of cyberspace could be considered identitarian' because it strongly unites those who inhabit it and denotes precisely their particular characteristic (Cyber-activists, hackers, internet users, etc.); it is 'relational' because it allows different users to interact immersivity within likeminded spaces such as virtual communities and others."²² In the same sense, it is 'historic' because those who belong to new 'digital native' generations will retrieve some of their roots in cyberspace as their place of belonging. Hence, cyberspace establishes its entity and acquires some of the features that 'space' possesses. This new, generated space invites us to think about ourselves in new ways, beyond the understandings we knew before there were virtual spaces.

²¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (New York: Verso Books, 1993), 52.

²² Andrea Marzi, *Psychoanalysis, Identity, and the Internet: Explorations into Cyberspace* (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, an imprint of Taylor and Francis, 2016), 15.

1.8 The Lost Autonomy

Dennis D. Waskul contends that a function of the internet as medium is a reconfiguration of self/other relations that encourages experiences of liminality:

...internet is a natural environment for liminality and ekstasis,²³ a place where self and society must be made to exist in a process where both are translated into the conventions of the medium. Some people actively toy with these representations while others do not. However, in the final analysis these communicative dynamics are rooted in the liminal characteristics of the medium – not the motivations and intents of internet users themselves²⁴.

The potential for an ecstatic experience of standing outside oneself is tied closely to liminality, which symbolizes a space of transition, a time-out-of-time zone. This gap has important implications for the relationship between the self and the second self, i.e. avatar, during a virtual involvement such as a video game. There, for example, one may acknowledge the avatar or second self even when pausing the game and abandoning one's avatar.

In virtual space, this possibility of putting virtual experiences on pause and leaving the entire process without any consequence might be considered, on the one hand, a conceptual tool encouraging an animated/elevated understanding of the complex relationship between virtuality as being completely in control of the situation, and on the other hand, a disassociation and relegation of agency.

²³ Ekstasis refers to the state of being beside one's self or rapt out of one's self.

²⁴ Dennis D. Waskul, "Ekstasis and the Internet: Liminality and Computer-Mediated Communication," *New Media & Society* 7, no. 1 (2005): 47.

The Lost Autonomy (2019) is a project in which I use videos (recorded from both real life and open world video games) to trace out the emotional relationship between the self and avatar. It is fascinating to me the way players can form a strong bond with their avatars through interaction and involvement while playing a video game, and then completely disengage themselves and cut off all connections instantly by pausing the program to stop playing.

It appears that cyberspace, as a liminal space, seems to create a new reality requiring new rules. In this sense, my piece, *The Lost Autonomy*, explores a reconfigured concept of 'waiting' in a cyber experience via the form of a paused game loop.²⁵ In the context of studying embodiment and health and medical discourses online, Hester Parr contends that, "It is relatively easy to begin to argue that the physical body is sometimes forgotten in virtual space and seek to recall it as an academic project. It is less easy to understand how virtual space both enables a sense of technological disembodiment and yet simultaneously reconstitutes and reinforces the physical body."²⁶ This uncanny relationship between the self and the avatar is the main subject of my piece. The avatar remains wandering around in limbo, halfway between fulfilling the gamer's desires to control the experience as they please, and expressing the gamer's repression of the virtual self, having apparently abandoned it. As a result, a new order emerges, which I refer to as 'waiting.'

When we go through a virtual immersion and act as one with our virtual selves, the avatar can be said to be 'live.' The avatar loses this liveness, however, when it is not

²⁵ The game loop refers to the overall flow of the game program. It is referred to as a 'loop,' as the program keeps looping infinitely until manually stopped.

²⁶ Hester Parr, "New Body-Geographies: The Embodied Spaces of Health and Medical Information on the Internet," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no.1 (February 2002): 75.

being played. I argue that this state of waiting creates a productive gap. In most cases, when left on pause, avatars do some sort of automated, repetitive movement, mimicking us in real life, and asking for players' engagement with the virtual experience. The player could always choose to get back to the game and keep interacting with the virtual self; however, in my piece, the avatar remains disabled and distilled, moving and yet no longer 'live,' waiting to be played, as it has temporarily lost its autonomy it once shared with the player. Yet, it remains the player's virtual self.

When we pause a video game, we essentially detach our subordinated self from the avatar. The game remains frozen in this state until the player resumes the process and decides to re-form the relationship with their virtual self. This frequent disruption and reestablishment of avatarial identification through pausing prompts me to take the 'mirror stage' concept as an entry point to investigate the idea that video games 'reflect' players back to themselves. This repetitive act of leaving or returning is the dynamic of gameplay. As Rehal explains:

Systematic rupture of the agential and identificatory linkage between players and avatars is a defining characteristic, suggesting that the mirror-image's loss is as vital as its acquisition. Repetition is central to another aspect of psychoanalytic theory in which an object that "stands in" for a lost and desired other is repeatedly tossed away, retrieved, and tossed again.²⁷

The extended relationship between the real self and virtual self goes beyond cyberspace and into one's everyday life, forming a unique identity attached to both virtual and physical worlds. The avatar is not a static pre-made entity but rather a growing adaptation

²⁷ Rehal, "Playing at Being," 110.

of ourselves that evolves through our interactions within cyberspace where we can experience the dislocation of our bodies from the physical world. This disruption leads us to feel unobstructed from the former dominance of real space, and frees us from traditional concepts of bodies and from the constraints of site-specific social locations. As David Owen explains in his text, *Player and Avatar*, the cinematographic aspects of cyberspace (as a graphic representation of data) propel us into the idea of proprioception (the sense of self-movement and body position), resulting from an augmentative relationship between real and virtual selves.²⁸ This growing interaction happening in virtual reality demands a balance between action and reflection and the capability of conforming users to the context's rules. Doing vs. being is an essential concept in interactive video games more than in other media and offers the potential for redefinitions of body, mind, and psyche.

1.9 Conclusion

My solo thesis exhibition is entitled, *The Prototype for the Soul*, and is connected to my personal experiences formed in cyberspace. As I move from virtual spaces created by my interaction with the computer back to the physical world, these virtual experiences become a part of my consciousness. My aim is to solidify these memories and bring them back to the physical world.

The physical pieces in the exhibition aim to connect the physical body with the virtual environment and explore the spaces where they intersect. I grew up using digital devices to save and transfer data. The USB thumb drives cast in resin (*Mementos No.2*,

²⁸David Owen, *Player and Avatar: The Affective Potential of Videogames* (Jefferson N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2017), 99.

2020) act as units of memory of themselves and contain sublime references to a cherished yet buried digitally-based memory that cannot be summoned from solid form. The resin cast USB drives contain hair and other fragments from the physical world. I am also here drawing on the infamous “fly in amber,” the accidental preservation of a historical moment far from the digital era.

A piece that shares its name with the exhibition title, *The Prototype for the Soul*, is comprised of three hand-carved soap stone pieces. The algorithm (see Appendix) carved on the soapstone is an algorithm for affect in that it is a set of instructions that would control the animation of an avatar’s expressed reactions. The commands to control the avatar were designed to simulate human reactions such as suffering, stress, and exhaustion. These codes are examples of prototyping techniques meant to make an avatar’s performance resemble human behavior as closely as possible.

In *The Illusion of Agency or the Body Without Organs* (2020), I designed 3D models of crumpled papers. The 3D models are virtually recreated based on the physical crumpled papers shaped by hand. In the process of creating these virtual replicas, I attempted to re-form the 3D models through the software, imitating the moves I made by hand to create the physical versions. I continued the 3D design process until they were identical to the physical objects and then printed them as 3D models. This way, the physical crumpled papers made by hand have been permanently replaced by 3D printed replicas made using software, simulating the human touch.

The Virtual Pilgrimage (2019) is a video installation that depicts two machinimas made in the video game, *Grand Theft Auto*²⁹. The videos screen two landscapes, each

²⁹ Rockstar Game, Developed by Rockstar North. *Grand Theft Auto V*. PlayStation 3, 2013.

with a dead animal body that never putrefies and is suspended in a loop. The images play over and over and they draw attention to breaks and ruptures in VR as a source of beauty. For the accompanying audio component I utilised the same codes used for *The Prototype for the Soul*. The audio for this piece sounds like an audiobook in which a singer reads the code aloud with emotional affectation, as if she is telling a story. In fact, she is simply reading the codes for 5 minutes. Visitors used headphones placed in front of two video projections to access the audio.

The Lost Autonomy (2019) is a three-channel video installation that documents me mimicking my avatar in *The Sims* for an hour. All the actions I perform in the video are inspired by programmed actions avatars do on pause mode. Regardless of the extent of immersion that occurs as a result of narrativity, this piece focuses on the moment that narrative breaks down and the avatar is neglected, abandoned or broken. It is an anti-narrative performance illustrating the points of exaggeration—in this case odd, looping gestures.

This exhibition is meant to provoke questions about our transforming relationship and increasing entanglement with digital technology, and about how our immersion into data worlds might alter our understandings of time, space, and agency. I have used enduring materials like stone to explore the relationships between digital and real worlds, technology and permanence, and monumentality and disposability. Digital devices have blended into our surroundings to become a part of our space and cultural structures. Since new generations belonging to the digital era will have formative roots in cyberspace, my thesis exhibition seeks to represent cyberspace as having a historic quality. This is an

ongoing project investigating continuous process through which virtual experiences find their way into everyday life reality.

Each work in the exhibition explores a different stage of our digital immersion through a virtual narrative. It starts with observing the story as an outsider, continues by becoming a part of that experience through acting as a whole with avatars, and ends with an attempt to embody this experience in physical forms.

Chapter 2

2 Interview

Skawennati's approach to the representation of human subjects in the on-line game world through avatars and other game characters is quite unique. By making her protagonist an extension of the self in charge of the action in these virtual worlds, Skawennati creates opportunities for cultural self-determination to explore Indigenous histories, not as an outsider witnessing the history but as an Indigenous person. Her mobilization of cyberspace to imagine possible futures for Indigenous populations while exploring and preserving heritage, rituals, and traditions, opens up multiple creative possibilities and forms of communication. Skawennati envisions Indigenous societies in the future retrieving their culture by creating an Indigenous virtual environment. Her works reveal a monumental representation of the past and some of what Indigenous peoples have been through over time, from surviving colonization to genocide. Skawennati's work is a twist of past, present, and future.

Skawennati makes art that addresses history, the future, and change from her perspective as an urban Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) woman and as a cyberpunk avatar. Her early adoption of cyberspace as both a location and a medium for her practice has led to groundbreaking projects such as *CyberPowWow* and *TimeTraveller*TM. She is best known for her machinimas—movies made in virtual environments—but also produces still images, textiles and sculpture.³⁰

³⁰ Skawennati, "Bio," Skawennati.com, <https://www.skawennati.com/bio/bio.html>

Her works have been presented in Europe, Oceania, Hawai‘i, China and across North America in exhibitions such as “Uchronia I What if?”, in the HyperPavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale; “Now? Now!” at the Biennale of the Americas; and “Looking Forward (L’Avenir)” at the Montreal Biennale. They are included in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the National Bank of Canada and the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, among others. She received the 2019 Salt Spring National Art Prize Jurors’ Choice Award and a 2020 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow. Skawennati is represented by ELLEPHANT.

Skawennati has been active in various communities. In the 1980s, she joined SAGE (Students Against Global Extermination) and the Quebec Native Women’s Association. In the 1990s she co-founded Nation to Nation, a First Nations artist collective, while working in and with various Indigenous organizations and artist-run centres, including the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal and Oboro. In 2005, she co-founded Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), a research-creation network whose projects include the Skins workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling and Digital Media as well as the Initiative for Indigenous Futures. Throughout most of the 2010s, she volunteered extensively for her children’s elementary school, where she also initiated an Indigenous Awareness programme. In 2019, she co-founded centre d’art daphne, Tiohtià:ke/Mooniyang/Montreal’s first Indigenous artist-run centre.

Born in Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory, Skawennati belongs to the Turtle clan. She holds a BFA from Concordia University in Montreal, where she

resides.³¹

2.1 The Indigenous Virtual Environment

In this online interview through Zoom that happened on July 3, 2020, we began our discussion with some general information regarding Skawennati's interpretation around cyberspace and how she has incorporated it within her artistic practice. We explored how she developed different principles, through which she analyzed online experiences and platforms. The conversation around cyberspace moved to a discussion of how she investigates and creates Indigenous virtual environments and how these projects and case studies in Aboriginal Storytelling and Experimental Digital Media aim to empower youth and initiate Indigenous futures.

What does cyberspace mean to you in general?

I usually say cyberspace includes the web, virtual environments like Second Life³², VR (actually Second Life used to be VR but now VR has changed), also video games, and social media. Cyberspace is many things, but basically it is the places we have been going without our physical bodies (clearly, my avatar has a digital body).

What characteristics have drawn you toward virtual spaces as a medium for your art practice?

³¹ Skawennati, "Bio," Skawennati.com, <https://www.skawennati.com/bio/bio.html>

³² Linden Lab, *Second Life*, version 6.4.12.555248 for MacOS, February 3, 2021; June 23, 2003.

I was first introduced to virtual space in the '90s in university (though I did have a basic DOS class in high school). I had a class called Computer as a Design Tool, and we learned Hypercard, which is the precursor to HyperLink, which is a precursor to the web as we know it today. Also, I learned DigiPaint, which was a little bit like Photoshop, and I was drawn to the tool very much. I loved the non-linear aspect of Hypercard and I loved how you could manipulate the imagery in DigiPaint. I also loved all the talk about how this information superhighway was going to improve everyone's lives and create better lives for everybody.

I felt seduced by cyberspace, not like I chose it. I didn't exactly say, "this is the medium that is going to be my medium." I feel that I am an artist who wants the medium to fit the message and for so long the right medium for my message has been cyberspace and the digital medium. So, it was more like falling in love. I'm trying to think of a better word than "seduce" but I like that word a lot because it wasn't what I thought it would be; the medium has turned into something else 25 years later. Cyberspace is not the information superhighway. Yes, we get lots of information in there, of course. But it's become a replication of the unjust capitalistic society that we live in now.

But I still find hope in that space. There's so much you can do, I feel. I love the idea of creating these spaces, of world-building. That is what I do in Second Life. I am able to create these environments and these characters and tell these stories in there. To me, it's a more familiar and accessible way to tell a story than by making a film. Imagine doing a science-fiction movie where I would need incredible set builders and costume designers—like teams of them! I would just need so much more and millions and millions of dollars to do it.

Nowadays, I'm turning toward fashion and creating things in the physical world again. I realized that I have been thinking about fashion—or at least costume—since 2001, since *CyberPowWow*. What does your avatar wear? What does it mean? What does it mean to wear a Tank Girl avatar? I was recently looking at some old images from *CyberPowWow*. I had two different costumes for my avatar. One was an Indigenous beauty queen; the other one was Tank Girl dressed as an “Indian.” What we wear and what our avatars wear has become very important to me. After having worked in cyberspace for many years, I see that there are many people who don't understand what they are looking at. That is, when they see an avatar, they don't know what part of it I've made or added or developed and what part of it is from the company that created the platform. They don't know where I start and where the company ends. I think when you make clothing though, it's easier for people to understand what you're doing.

You have explored cyberspace in a myriad of ways with individual projects. Would you discuss how your perspective toward cyberspace as both a tool and as a space to create your work has changed over time? And how you see it today?

In general, I think online platforms have become overly commercialized. They mine our data. These companies take from us without making it clear to us what the exchange is. Also, being dependent on a company to make your work is not very smart. At one point, Second Life was going bankrupt, and I was only halfway through making *TimeTraveller*TM, and I thought “what will I do? My story is not finished!” I don't like being dependent on a company. I am still making machinima because I still love it, but I'm trying to make shorter machinimas. What has changed for me is that I have realized

that cyberspace is just not the utopia it promised to be; it was built upon war-mongering, capitalist, racist, sexist beginnings. It's not a Terra Nullius (there is no such thing!).

We might focus on CyberPowWow and your online community in Second Life for the next question. I mean, you created a digital environment and made this place your own by inviting like-minded people to share this space with you, to simply hang out and get to know each other, and to promote their art and culture. How has cyberspace as a concept been transformed from one of 'non-place' to that of 'place'?

CyberPowWow was a Nation to Nation project. Nation to Nation was a First Nations collective I co-founded with Ryan Rice and Eric Robertson. *CyberPowWow* came about after I was shown The Palace, a graphical chat room. It was a cutting-edge technology at the time, incorporating the texting that we use all the time today, but with imagery. At the time, it was so amazing to be able to talk to someone that way, in real-time and instantaneously and for free. (Although of course, it wasn't free. You had to have access to all these resources: to the computer, the internet, the modem and the knowledge.) I saw that as a wonderful tool. I felt like there was a lot of contemporary Indigenous artists in Canada, in North America, but we perhaps didn't have the support that we needed or wanted, that you could have if you were together in one place, and to be able to talk about art, or about issues. I saw The Palace as a potential place to do that. The first time we met was in the main palace which had been created by the company. I had invited artists make work to put on our own website—this may have been one of the first online galleries! The idea was that people would visit the website and go to The Palace to talk about the art and the issues we were interested in.

While in The Palace, though, somebody was creating problems for us. They were using little programming scripts to interrupt our conversation. I guess it was a good thing because I realized we needed our own palace. We needed a safe space, one that was Indigenously determined. And that is what we are continuing with AbTeC Island (in Second Life), which is an initiative of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace AbTeC,

What was the main idea behind CyberPowWow, and how did you use cyberspace as a platform to talk about Indigenous art and artists?

We wanted to show that Indigenous people could make art in this digital territory and it would still be Indigenous art. One of the things I've been doing for twenty years is envisioning Indigenous people in the future. We are so often used in movies and in literature as literary devices to represent the past. And I don't think that's great for us. I think it creates within us a longing for a past that can never happen again. I don't think I would want to go back to the past, but I think there are elements of our history and traditional knowledge—the things we believed, the way we acted, the way we were not extractive, how we made peace and how our society functioned—that seem really great. These are things that we can think about incorporating into today's society by bringing them back.

It seems you would prefer to focus on the future and imagine Aboriginal people in the future rather than focusing on the past. You aim to keep the things you like from the past, like the literature behind that, and let go of the rest...

I'm asking the question, what do we keep from the past? What are the things that we value, and we want to continue to bring with us? What should we leave behind?

Would you talk about the role of narrative in your work? And how you took Aboriginal storytelling into cyberspace?

Thomas King has a lecture called *The Truth about Stories*³³ and it's brilliant, just brilliant. And that's who I think about when you ask me that question because he says, the truth about stories is, that's all we are. You know, society is based on the stories we tell ourselves, and everything is built upon the last story. It's super important to tell the stories from different perspectives. *TimeTraveller*TM was telling history from a Mohawk perspective. And *She Falls For Ages* is a sci-fi retelling of the Haudenosaunee creation story. So, the narrative is very important.

However, I'm trying to move away from the dependence on words. And the Wampum belt is a great example because there are no words in that; there is imagery and symbolism. There is material, and there's knowledge of not just how to make it but what the Wampum belt was used for. I am very interested in the fact that clothing does not need words. Because language is an issue. If we only speak in English, then we're excluding people who don't speak English. I mean, I love languages in general, and I've learned to communicate well in English, but I'm really interested in communicating on another level, one that is not dependent on language.

³³ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

What do you think about the role of language in cyberspace and reality? Do you think it shares similar qualities? Do you think we can communicate with people in cyberspaces regardless of accepted languages?

You need language like crazy in virtual reality. I mean, in Second Life you need it to talk or type to interact with a menu which is in English.

Would you discuss the role of fantasy as the subject of desire in "She Falls For Ages"? Here I am thinking about fantasy as a way to express the ideal version of self in an imaginative character that you intend to create from scratch. Or are there any unfulfilled desires in real life that you want to express in the process of creating this project?

Well, in *She Falls For Ages*, the world is like a utopic world, or my utopic world where there's no race. The reason why people have different colors is not the point of the work, but it's there for me. And it's there for people who look for it. The mother of the two kids is green. No matter what the color of a person she mates with, the children would not come out pink. If you're talking about color in color theory, there's no colors you can mix with green to become pink. The idea is everyone comes out randomly, one of these six colors. The only reason the two siblings are the same colors is because they're twins. I wanted it to be that way so that no one could discriminate because of your skin color because even your own child might be a totally different color from you.

Another thing in that movie is that Sky Woman is usually depicted as either clumsily falling through the hole of the tree or being pushed by her husband, and I didn't want to show either of those things. I wanted to show Sky Woman as a brave astronaut,

an explorer who would jump through this hole in order to make sure her race will survive, to go to the next place so that they can continue to live.

As I understand, you have thought about making more physical artworks in the future and expanding this practice? How do you imagine this unfolding?

Actually, that's what my whole practice is about visualizing the world you want to live in and then making it happen. I've been using cyberspace as a visualization tool. Once I see it really clearly, I can make the item in real life. That was the case with the Wampum belts in *The Peacemaker Returns*. First, I made them in Second Life, and then I made them in real life as well.

3 Portfolio

Mementos No.2

2020



Mementos No.2, 2020, Sculptural resin cast of USB thumb drives.

Digital storage, similar to physical reality, has a few restrictions on everlastingness. This opens up the possibility of losing data or access to it. The process of saving our memories in digital storage devices to have an eternal copy of them is notionally oxymoronic. We consistently seek a permanent medium to solidify our memories saved on digital storage. We make hard copies of them, we print out the photos, we write down notes and remake them in the physical world. In *Mementos No.2* I have used materials such as strands of hair and leaves to mimic such a memory effect. By incorporating these physical materials, I aim for these works to act like units of memory themselves. At the same time they contain sublime references to a cherished yet buried memory that will be instantly summoned.



Mementos No.2, 2020, Sculptural resin cast of USB thumb drive and pinecone seeds.



Mementos No.2, 2020, Sculptural resin cast of USB thumb drive and lanceolate leaf.

Mementos No.2, 2020, Sculptural resin cast of USB thumb drive and hair.

The Prototype for The Soul 2020



The Prototype for the Soul, 2020, carved soapstone, 7.3cm x 7cm x 12cm.

The Prototype for the Soul traces the relationship between programming language and digital media, specifically gaming. As Patricia Harris discusses the meaning of codes in *Understanding Coding with Minecraft*, some specific rules should be followed in writing codes to make them functional: "...coders must know what they want the computer to do and write a plan. Coders must use special words to have the computer take input, make choices, and take action. Coders need to use logic with AND, OR, NOT, and other logic statements as keywords."³⁴ Accordingly, languages are essential to software development and determine user interactions within gaming platforms. The video game is language-based in its essence, as the codes run the program.

³⁴ Patricia Harris, *Understanding Coding with Minecraft™* (Buffalo: Rosen Publishing Group, 2016), 12.

For *The Prototype for the Soul*, I obtained the codes written on January 23, 1997, by the Maxis Core Technology Group³⁵ and carved/printed them onto pieces of stone (see Appendix). The codes represent the design for the motives, feedback loop, and failure conditions of the simulated people in a video game called *The Sims*.³⁶



The Prototype for the Soul, 2020, carved soapstone, 7.5cm x 7cm x 12cm.



The Prototype for the Soul, 2019, printed texts on rocks.

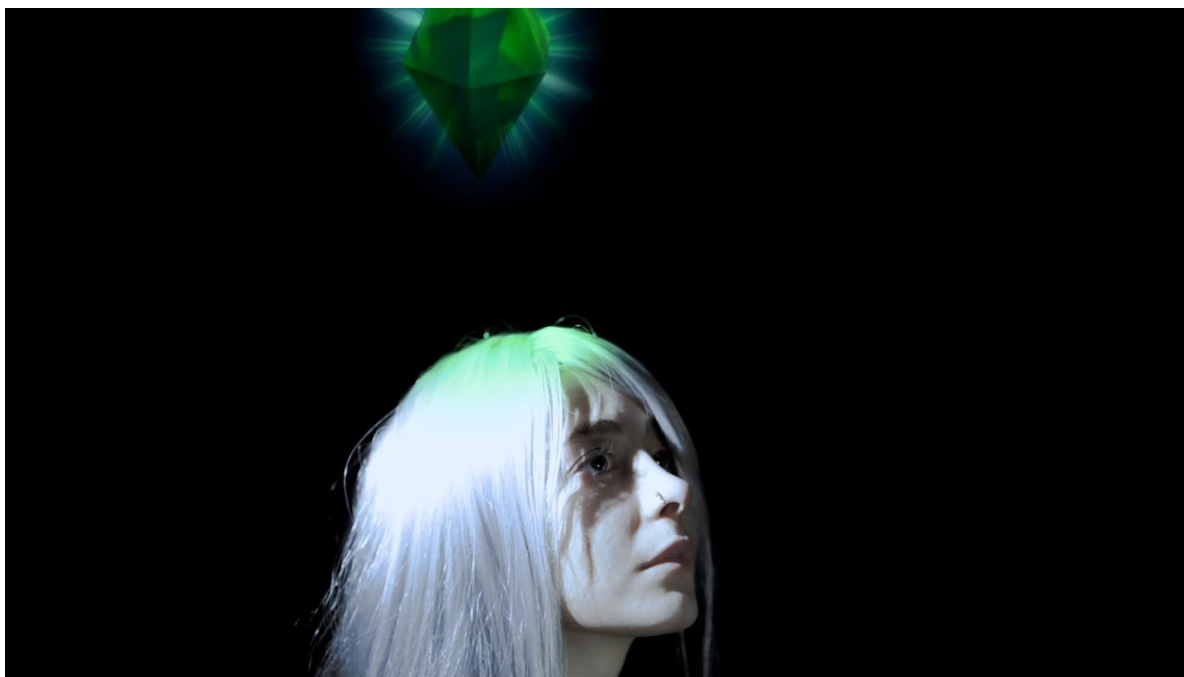
³⁵ Will Wright, "The Soul of The Sims," *The Sims*, Macintosh HD, source code, 1997. <https://www.donhopkins.com/home/images/Sims/>

³⁶ Electronic Arts, Developed by Maxis, *The Sims*, Microsoft Windows, 2000.

In the same sense, a video game with an interactive digital narrative is based on non-traditional texts, and provides a fascinating experience of interactivity in reading practices. It integrates the reader's interaction in order to produce meaning, and this process happens by means of language. The language-based quality of video games would define them as a concept and in the same sense as a piece of literature. There is an audio piece related to this project. A singer reads the code out loud in an emotional way, and as if becoming emotionally attached to the narrative.

<https://vimeo.com/480250807>

The Lost Autonomy 2019



The Lost Autonomy, 2019, 10 minutes and 20 seconds, Still frame from a three-channel video installation.

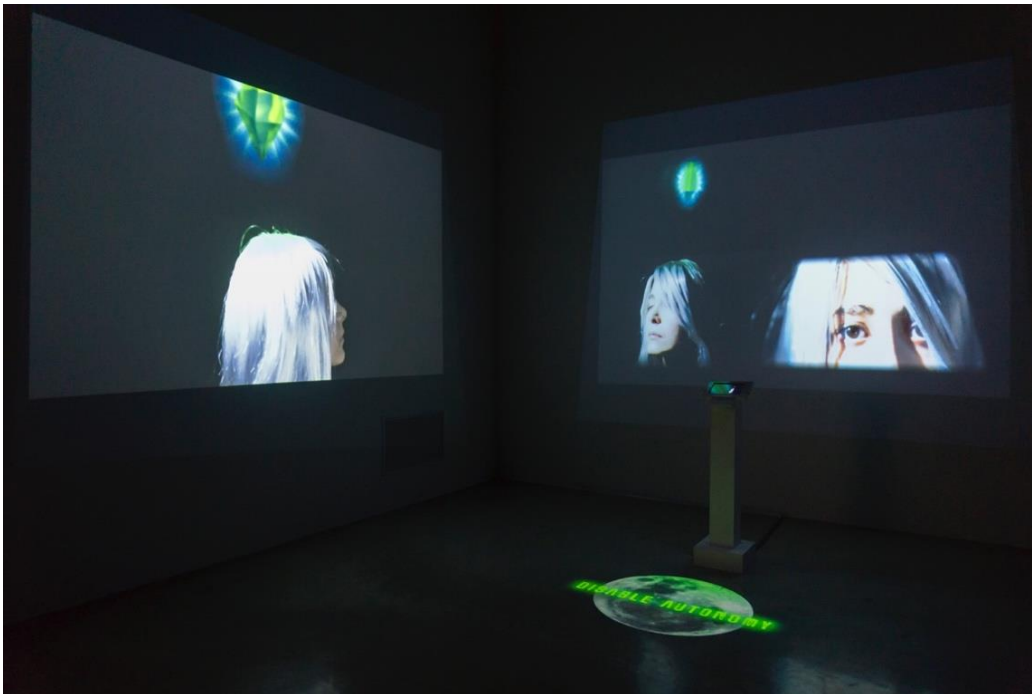
Since the emergence of graphical virtual worlds, the creation of our second selves in cyberspace no longer rely primarily on text-based means. Virtual reality as a technological platform for human interaction is entirely linked to self-image, resulting from a lifetime of experiences outside of virtual worlds. Virtual space provides users the opportunity to control their self-representation (via avatar selection) in cyberspace, where the communication occurs. As a result, the user can fulfill their desire to control the simulated self.

In *The Lost Autonomy*, I investigate what might happen if a user became stuck in cyberspace. After spending a long time in there, I see the user starting to act as a whole

with their virtual body while exploring the digital space. While the openness of choice offers us an almost limitless range of possibilities in cyberspace, we do not entirely escape ourselves. The roles we choose to live as our avatars are inevitably affected by notions embedded in the non-virtual. Hence, the avatar becomes an intimate representation of what we are and desire to be.



The Lost Autonomy, 2019, 10 mins and 20 sec. Still frame from a three-channel video installation.



The Lost Autonomy, 2019, Installation view.



The Lost Autonomy, 2019, three channel video installation, installation view.

The links below show the videos used for the three channel installation:

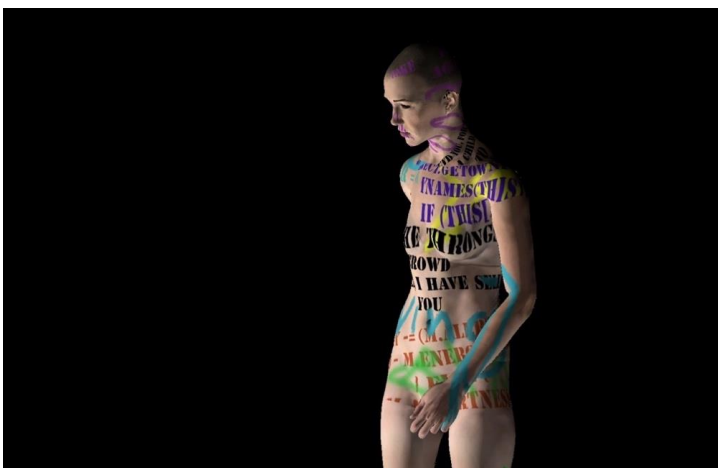
<https://vimeo.com/403135227>

<https://vimeo.com/403134237>

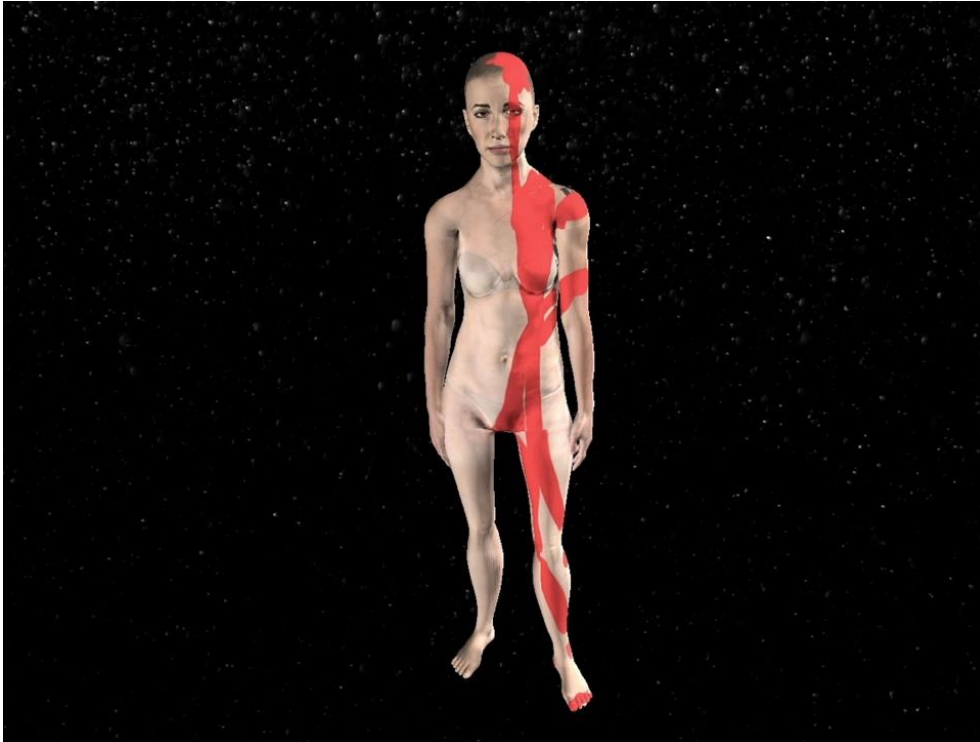
<https://vimeo.com/403133263>

The Cyber Soul 2019

The Cyber Soul is a short animation presented on an iPad, inspired by the emotional relationship between the self and avatar in role playing video games. David Owen puts it like this: “The illusion of agency for the player is the effect of being in control, of becoming immersed within the game story and environment, and of becoming emotionally invested in the outcome of the story. A sense of having agency within the game—influence over events and narrative choices that matter—inspires emotional investment and a willingness to immerse.”



The Cyber Soul, 2019, video installation of animated avatars, 1min and 58 sec. Still frame from a single channel video.



The Cyber Soul, 2019, video installation of animated avatars, 1min and 58 sec, Still frame from a single channel video.



The Cyber Soul, 2019, video installation of animated avatars, 1min and 58 sec. Still frame from a single channel video.

<https://vimeo.com/480161169>

The Illusion of Agency or the Body Without Organs 2020



The Illusion of Agency or the Body Without Organs, 2020, 3D Printed PLA of crumpled papers.

Since interactive video games unfold the notion of an agency, the (potentially) obtained presence demands ‘being,’ which the player experiences through participating in a non-linear narrative and settling into the environment. By accepting the game rules and consequences, the user accepts the virtual body and takes actions as part of active agency, an agency that moves and feels. In the project physical crumpled papers made by hand have been permanently replaced by 3D printed replicas made by a software simulating the human touch.



Crumpled Paper No. 1, 3D Printed PLA.



Crumpled Paper No. 2, 3D Printed PLA.

The Virtual Pilgrimage 2019

The Virtual Pilgrimage consists of two machinimas made in Grand Theft Auto, screening peaceful landscapes on a seashore, and two dead animals abandoned in the scene. These pieces explore the timelessness and liminality in the video games. As we stare at the meditative landscape, we feel trapped in an everlasting loop as time passes and nothing happens to the dead bodies.



The Virtual Pilgrimage No.1, 2019, Machinima filmed in Grand Theft Auto, 15 min. Still frame from a two-channel video installation.

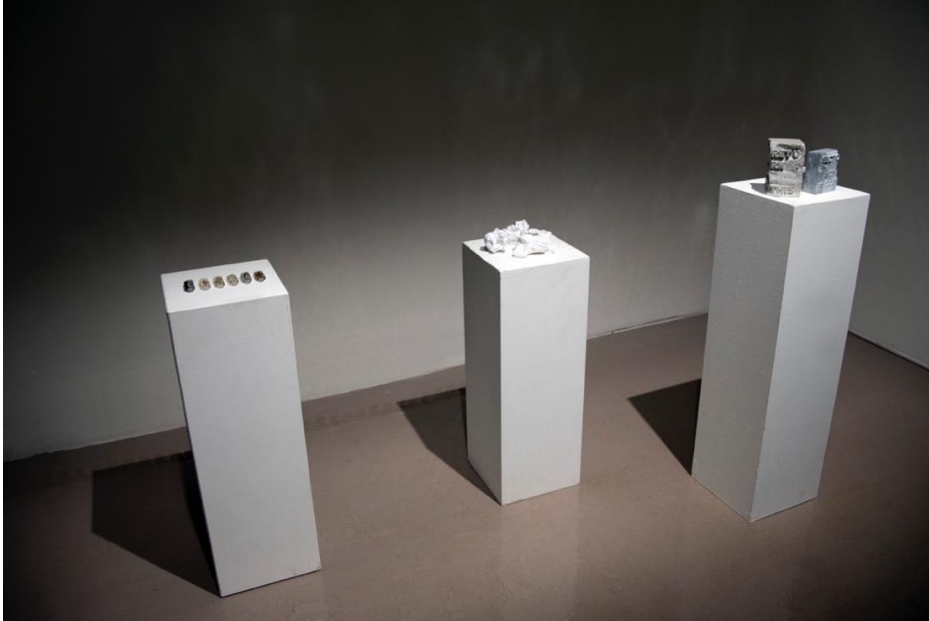


The Virtual Pilgrimage No.2, 2019, Machinima filmed in Grand Theft Auto, 10 mins and 50 sec. Still frame from a two-channel video installation.

<https://vimeo.com/406906169>

The link below is a gallery tour of the project *The Prototype for the Soul*, exhibited in McIntosh Gallery (July 2020), followed by photos showing the installation view.

<https://vimeo.com/488369869>



Mementos No.2, 2020; *The Illusion of Agency or the Body without Organs*, 2020; *The Prototype for the Soul*, 2019.



The Virtual Pilgrimage No.1, 2019, Machinima filmed in Grand Theft Auto, 15min. Installation view.

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Appendix

Will Wright, "The Soul of The Sims," *The Sims*, Macintosh HD, source code, 1997.
<https://www.donhopkins.com/home/images/Sims/>

```
#include <stdio.h>
#include <time.h>
#include <string.h>
#include <unistd.h>
#include <fcntl.h>

void clr() {
    const char* CLEAR_SCREE_ANSI = "\e[1;1H\e[2J";
    write(STDOUT_FILENO,CLEAR_SCREE_ANSI,12);
}

float sRand(int upper) {
    srand(time(NULL));
    return rand() % upper + 1;
}

void SimMotives(int count);
void ChangeMotive(int motive, float value);
void SimJob(int type);

void AdjustMotives(int x, int y);
void DrawMotiveSheet(void);
void DrawMotive(int xpos, int ypos, int value);
void InitMotives(void);

float Motive[16] = {0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0};
float oldMotive[16] = {0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0,0};

int ClockH = 8, ClockM = 0, ClockD = 0;

char logmsg[99999];
void Log(char* msg) {
    char _msg[255];
    sprintf(_msg, "[Day %d at %02d:%02d] %s\n", ClockD, ClockH, ClockM, msg);
    strcat(logmsg, _msg);
}

enum
{
```

mHappyLife = 0,
mHappyWeek = 1,
mHappyDay = 2,

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Yas Nikpour Khoshgrudi

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

2018-2020 Master of Fine Arts, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

2011-2015 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Major in Painting, Tehran University of Art, Tehran, Iran

Honours and Awards:

2019 Ontario Graduate Scholarship, Western University, London, ON

2018 Western Graduate Research Scholarship, Western University, London, ON

2018 Faculty of Arts and Humanities Dean's Entrance Scholarship, Western University, London, ON

Related Work Experience:

2018-2020 Graduate Teaching Assistant, Western University, Department of Visual Arts, London, ON

2019 Intern/Gallery Assistant, Forest City Gallery, London, ON

2016-2018 Member of Founding Board and Coordinator, Iran-Poland Friendship Association, Warsaw, Poland

Selected Exhibitions:

July 2020 *The Prototype for the Soul*, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON

July 2018 *It's My Turn! No Other Chance to Survive!* Dastan Basement Gallery, Tehran, Iran

February 2019 *Selsun Blue*, Art Lab, Western University, London, ON

Jun 2019 *Pacing*, Satellite Project Space, London, ON

April 2019 *Lost and Found: Members' Show and Sale*, Forest City Gallery, London, ON

September 2019, *What We Might Become*, Art Lab, Western University, London, ON

December 2016 *The Undone Story*, Main Hall Gallery, Tehran University of Art, Tehran, Iran