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Digital Jozi: Hybrid identity, avatars and anonymity in online gaming spaces

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand Department of Anthropology

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Wits Anthropology Plagiarism Declaration.

School of Social Sciences Department of Anthropology

Plagiarism Declaration

I Sandile Mncube hereby declare that this research report submitted for assessment is my own work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.

I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.

I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own work and/ or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature 

Date: 30 June 2025

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Digital Jozi: Hybrid identity, avatars and anonymity in online gaming spaces

Research Introduction

Overwhelmed by the demands of coursework and research, I found solace in conversations with my friend Thomas. Thomas and I met in 2022 in my final year of undergrad at University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). He is a Game Design student in the Wits Digital Arts Faculty, and a freelance designer who found a way to earn through a self-taught skill: character creation and Virtual 3D environment creation. Basically, he makes 3D worlds for a living. One evening, amidst the chaotic comfort of his room, we played *Cyberpunk 2077* while I confided in him about the struggles of balancing a reading-intensive academic course with the pressures of research. *Cyberpunk 2077* is an action RPG set in the high-tech world of Night City. Players control 'V', a mercenary who becomes intertwined with the digital consciousness of a rebellious rockstar named Johnny Silverhand. The story is about their struggle to separate their identities and save V's life. This game is action packed and is great for people who like gameplay with violence.

I was explaining to him how the burden of academic expectations had dulled my love for reading. Thomas laughed, and with a mixture of jest and sincerity, remarked on how relieved he was to have chosen Game Design instead. He described how his world revolved around imagination and creation. He described how he used Blender (a 3D art software) and other digital tools to bring characters and objects to life for gaming studios and the emerging metaverse. He paused the game, shifting his focus entirely to the conversation, and showed me the marketplace where his 3D models were sold. The demand for these digital creations was high, not just for gaming but also for virtual real estate and avatar customisation within digital worlds.

This was the first time I encountered the metaverse in such tangible terms. The metaverse is a post-reality universe, an ever-evolving, persistent, multiuser environment that seamlessly merges reality with digital virtuality. It is the result of the convergence of sophisticated technologies, including Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), allowing for immersive, multisensory interactions with virtual spaces, digital objects, and other

users (Mystakidis 2022, 486). I learned that people were purchasing virtual homes at real world prices, that game environments were being used to study human behaviour and preferences, and that Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) were more than just entertainment; rather, they were sites of economic exchange, social experimentation, and identity construction. MMORPGs are online multiplayer role-playing games (RPGs) in which hundreds or even thousands of players are simultaneously linked to a single server in an eternal universe (Achterbosch et al 2008, 1). All these characteristics of MMORPGs are factors that we find in real life as well. Thomas' work as a freelance international designer exemplified the importance of avatars, not just as aesthetic representations but as embodiments of personal and cultural expression. It also revealed to me some of the ways avatars can be used or utilised outside the gaming space. It showed me that avatars can be used to represent someone's image online to the same extent that it can be used to facilitate virtual monetary transactions as well. As he showed me his character designs, I noticed how closely they resembled MMORPG avatars because of their humanoid structures, expressive faces, and intricate details. This realisation led me to reflect about how virtual bodies mediate our perceptions of selfhood and social belonging.

The fast development of digital technology and virtual environments has transformed our understanding of identity, community, and social interaction. This thesis investigates the intersection of these processes in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) with specific reference to avatars as a means of identity formation and social interaction in virtual game worlds. Focused on South African gamers and game designers, specifically those in Johannesburg, who are actively involved in both the production and consumption of virtual game worlds, the study is concerned with how their experiences in virtual environments shape their social relationships, identities, and overall ability to create their own games.

Framing the Research

Online gaming platforms have become dynamic spaces where players transcend geographical boundaries to engage in real-time interactions with others from across the world. Through avatars, players form bonds, share strategies, and build communities with peers from diverse backgrounds. These avatars are not just digital representations but vehicles for exploring identity, creativity, and social connection. They are crafted with phenotypic traits – skin colour,

facial features, hairstyles – that reflect personal and cultural narratives. Some players recreate their real-world identities, while others use avatars to explore idealised or entirely different personas.

Games like *Call of Duty*, *Cyberpunk*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Lost Ark* illustrate the collaborative nature of these spaces. *Destiny of Ancient Kingdoms* (DOAK), developed by Utopia Dream Entertainment Alliance, represents a landmark moment in South Africa's digital gaming history as the first locally created MMORPG to launch on Steam. Despite drawing on generic Norse mythology rather than indigenous narratives, the game's development, publishing and player base were entirely South African, making it a rare example of homegrown production in a global industry dominated by Euro-American studios.

Players from across the globe engage in building virtual landscapes and infrastructures, and forging long-lasting relationships (Crawford 2013, 3). Silicon Valley tech giants such as Ubisoft, Sony, and Microsoft have capitalised on this growing culture, driving the billion-dollar gaming industry forward (Crawford 2013,6). Yet, within these virtual spaces, questions arise about the intersection of race, identity, and community – elements that fundamentally define our lived experience. Virtual technologies challenge and expand these constructs by providing spaces where individuals can negotiate, reshape, and reimagine what it means to be human. They offer opportunities to transcend traditional boundaries of race and identity while simultaneously mirroring and amplifying existing societal structures.

These spaces compel us to ask how digital representations influence our perceptions of lived experience, fostering new understandings of social connection, belonging, and self-expression. How do players construct their sense of self in these spaces, and how do they enact these identities? Do they become different versions of themselves, and what social dynamics govern their acceptance within these communities? As Pace et al. (2009, 193-194) suggest, virtual worlds present a "perfect world" where individuals can be or do anything they wish. This research delves into the complexities of avatar creation and the interplay between virtual and real-world identities, with particular attention to players from the Global South and how they navigate these spaces.

Significance and Contribution

This research offers a rich, contextually grounded exploration that challenges conventional views of digital escapism by demonstrating how virtual gaming worlds serve as genuine spaces

for identity negotiation and social transformation. Drawing on immersive ethnography within Johannesburg's gaming culture, specifically, the gaming culture embodied by the Wits students who are enrolled for a Digital Arts degree, specifically those enrolled for Game Design at the Digital Arts building, the study provides an intimate account of how the 8 participants that I interviewed who use their avatars as dynamic instruments to reconstruct their identities and navigate the complexities of daily life. Some of the participants create their own games via this department and that aspect of their game creation will also be looked at in this research. By documenting how Johannesburg-based gamers harness the creative potential of avatar design, the research shows that virtual environments enable individuals to actively negotiate and transform their identities in response to real-world challenges.

The work reveals that the virtual and the physical are interwoven, with digital experiences mirroring and amplifying the specific challenges encountered in real-world settings. Methodologically, the research is innovative in its interdisciplinary approach as it combines digital arts and anthropology to understand lived experiences of Johannesburg gamers in online environments. It is multidisciplinary in that the research techniques and methods used were mainly anthropological, but the literature that was used to anchor this research is from different disciplines such as sociology and digital arts. This research also contributes to digital anthropology in that it helps us to understand technology and virtuality through an ethnographic lens and through anthropological techniques such as interviews and immersion within a specific field site. The study argues that virtual existence and environments offer precise insights into contemporary life and to an extent, we can understand these phenomena by studying contexts other than the Euro-American one. Furthermore, the research seeks to change the narrative of digital art and virtual existence from a South African perspective. It demonstrates that the academic work on gaming has predominantly drawn on Euro-American experiences, thereby sidelining viewpoints from the Global South. In contrast, this study foregrounds the South African experience by showing that Johannesburg based gamers engage in identity construction that is both contextually specific and globally relevant.

The research also aims to highlight how the gaming industry in South Africa is growing and what lessons can be learned from virtual landscapes that are applicable in real life. It shows that South African gamers not only interact within local contexts but also engage and collaborate with an international audience. Although local productions command a substantial following, many South Africans – particularly those in Johannesburg – primarily engage with the global world through television, where they consume predominantly Euro-American content as a key mode of accessing international cultural narratives. They also engage with the

global audience through social media platforms, business programmes or school initiatives, tertiary education initiatives or scholarships. This research demonstrates that gaming offers an alternative medium for global engagement not merely as a site of cultural consumption, but as a space where South Africans actively contribute to and shape virtual environments through direct participation. Thomas' anecdote prefaces some of the issues in the convergence of the identity politics and the creative aspects utilised in gaming environments. This has led to my argument for a hybrid identity framework that I will further expand in the theoretical sections that will assist this research in providing nuance for cultural and economic aspects of the environment.

Research questions

Main research question

How do Johannesburg based gamers and creators use avatars within MMORPGs to negotiate and reconstruct their social identities, and in what ways do these virtual practices influence their offline sense of self and community belonging?

Sub-Questions

1. How do players and game creators from different socio-economic backgrounds in Johannesburg make aesthetic and functional choices in avatar creation, and what social narratives inform these choices?

2. In what ways do players and game designers employ avatars to explore or resist real-world social categories such as race, gender, and class within virtual gaming spaces?

3. How do avatar-mediated interactions facilitate the formation of online communities among South African gamers, and how do these virtual communities intersect with offline social networks?

Research methods and fieldwork

Interviews

This section outlines the methodological strategies employed to gather large amounts of qualitative ethnographic data for this study. My field research involved the administration of semi-structured interviews and participant observation in virtual game environments and in the Digital Arts Department at Wits University. Virtual game environments refers to the online worlds of titles such as *Apex Legends*, *God of War*, and *Call of Duty*, accessed through computers and consoles, where players gather in voice-chat-enabled lobbies, explore richly rendered maps and raid dungeons together. These spaces, which are populated by avatars, text and audio channels, trade markets and in-game events offer a window into how social norms, leadership roles and creative expression unfold in real time.

Conducting online interviews against Johannesburg's energetic backdrop required a shift in method where each disrupted connection and background sound became more than a nuisance, revealing the technological systems, physical circumstances, and emotional states that underlie virtual participation. I conducted eight online interviews with eight different people. I followed up with subsequent in-person interviews on campus with all of my participants after they had returned from recess however; I spoke with Pata, Suzaku, Nhlax and Utlwa more than the other participants. The reason I had to conduct interviews online, instead of in-person, was because when my fieldwork period began, Wits University was going to its mid-year recess period towards the end of June 2024, so most of the people that I wanted to interview went back to their homes. I chose to do some interviews online and then collect the rest of the data through participant observation when the second semester began. The process of doing interviews online took me three weeks in total. From the first dropped connection to the hum of taxi horns, each glitch in the audio link of our interviews revealed more than technical frustration rather, it illuminated the socioeconomic realities of participants' lives. Unstable mobile data, shared family bandwidth, and the unpredictability of power outages surfaced as ethnographic signals, guiding me to chart disconnections alongside conversational themes. In doing so, I learned to treat every buffering pause as an invitation to interrogate how material conditions – often invisible in Euro-centric accounts of digital research – mediate access to and participation in virtual spaces. The following extract, taken from my field notes, offers an introduction to the realities and complexities of conducting online research in a place like South Africa:

> The interview that I had with Pata via Microsoft Teams was an exciting one. It is always a different feeling whenever you interview someone without seeing their face. Pata is a heavy talker, so I would have appreciated seeing him face-to-face and to see what his facial expressions had to say. Most of the times during the interview, I had to imagine what facial expressions he had on. He gave so much energy to the answers that he was providing me. I asked few questions and let him speak the entire time. He is the type of participant who answers your questions before you ask them. He is high spirited and even though I communicated with him via Microsoft teams, he made the interview enjoyable. We kept having a lot of connectivity problems during our interview. His voice would sometimes go soft because of network issues or sometimes even just disappear for a few minutes. I will acknowledge that this got me a bit anxious because I was mindful of the time that I had asked from him and all those technical difficulties were simply making it hard for me to conduct my interview seamlessly. Nevertheless, I had to be understanding about his network issues because the information he was providing me was valuable. I was at home when I was conducting this interview. There was a lot of distant background noise. At some point, there were sirens and taxis honking in the background. I guess the city did not care if I was conducting an interview or not. I had problems with my breathing. I am not sure if it was the heavy dust in the air or maybe it was just my anxiety from failing to convince the network to be on my side.

The absence of a video feed sharpened my aural awareness, transforming my role into that of a multisensory listener. I tuned into subtle shifts in vocal tone, the rhythm of pauses, and distant sirens weaving through responses. These sonic textures became an integral layer of my analysis, as telling of Johannesburg's urban pulse as participants' words themselves. Turning background noise into data meant that my transcripts evolved into 'soundscapes', where the city's presence was felt in every exchange and informed the way I interpreted meaning. Navigating consent and rapport in an online setting also demanded new ethical practices. After each conversation, I invited participants to review and redraft excerpts of our dialogue, ensuring they felt comfortable with how their voices and the contexts heard around them were represented. This collaborative approach not only honoured their agency but deepened the trust needed for candid reflection. In granting participants editorial input, I recognised that ethical research in digital arenas is as much about co-construction of the text as it is about co-production of knowledge (Markham 2013). I embraced a technographic mindset, meticulously logging details about headsets, device models, and network speeds alongside my fieldnotes. By mapping how different setups, like Bluetooth earbuds versus wired microphones, 3G hotspots versus fibre connections, influenced conversational flow and affect, I surfaced the intricate choreography between bodies and machines. These technical affordances, once relegated to an appendix, proved essential to understanding how players present themselves and navigate virtual worlds under real-world constraints (Hine 2020).

Leveraging semi-structured interviews proved essential for achieving the depth of understanding required for my research objectives. Semi-structured interviews enable a balance between guided questioning and open-ended exploration, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives more freely (Bryman 2016; Galletta 2013). In my study, semi-structured interviews were particularly effective in exploring participants' creative motivations and their nuanced experiences within virtual spaces. For instance, Pata's ability to elaborate on his artistic journey highlighted the method's flexibility in capturing diverse narratives. Participants for this study were recruited through snowball and purposive sampling. Snowball sampling, which involves referrals from existing participants to identify others with relevant experiences, and purposive sampling, which strategically selects individuals likely to provide rich, relevant data, were both integral to effectively utilising limited research resources (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Campbell et al. 2020). For example, Pata referred me to Suzaku, a participant whose unique perspective on identity reconstruction in virtual spaces added depth to my analysis.

Conducting interviews online presented both challenges and opportunities. While audio-only communication required me to pay closer attention to vocal cues such as tone and pitch changes, the use of Microsoft Teams provided practical advantages. Features such as recording and automated transcription simplified the data collection and analysis process. To ensure participants felt comfortable, I also allowed for flexibility in scheduling, accommodating their availability without significant logistical disruptions (Archibald et al. 2019). Additionally, I tested the platform's privacy settings extensively to confirm its security, which was particularly important given the sensitivity of some discussions (Convery and Cox 2012, 51).

Ethnography

In addition to interviews, I immersed myself in virtual gaming spaces to supplement my data and connect with potential participants. I immersed myself in online spaces for a month and other times, I was simply playing the games with either Utlwa, Pata, Nhlax or Suzaku offline on their computers or their consoles. By actively engaging with games and online communities, I gained a nuanced understanding of the social dynamics within these environments, which enriched the ethnographic component of my research. For example, participating in *Apex Legends,* a game which is widely played by most of my participants, allowed me to observe team dynamics and decision-making processes that reflect broader social interactions in virtual spaces (Hine 2015). I will speak more about the kinds of games

they were creating or preparing to create when I get into each individual chapter, and I introduce my participants in the subsequent chapters. In *Apex Legends*, you can either play as a team of up to three people or as an individual player and this affects your game play tremendously. In a battle royale setting as an individual character, you must, by all means necessary, ensure that you try to survive for as long as possible with minimal damage inflicted compared to the group dynamic where there are other players watching your back. I usually enjoyed team play, since I was learning the game, and so I had other players to protect me during the matches. These observations underscore the varied social and strategic dynamics that emerge within virtual gaming environments.

When the second semester began, I extended my fieldwork to the Wits Digital Arts Department. The department offers a dedicated teaching and production space for both Game Design and Animation, amongst other resources. Students who are enrolled there not only learn the theoretical and practical aspects of designing interactive worlds but also play, critique and reflect on a wide range of topics involving digital art, including MMORPGs as part of their coursework. By combining hands-on creation with structured analysis, the department cultivates a deep, practice-based understanding of MMORPGs, making its community invaluable interlocutors for this study. Its animation stream works perfectly with Game Design, teaching avatar conceptualisation, 3D modelling and motion mechanics, the very processes underpinning both digital art forms. Choosing this department was therefore essential because its synergies between animation and gaming open rich, unexplored experiences that bring crucial depth to digital anthropology and to my research on hybrid identity construction (Pink et al., 2015).

Ethnographically, the department's studio spaces hum with energy and debate. Here, dynamic creative artists who are unapologetic in their drive to innovate, gather around high-resolution gaming laptops and sketchpads, engaging in deep, reflective conversations that challenge and sharpen their work. As digital artists, they constantly seek ways to make their creations more accessible, from refining user interfaces to experimenting with inclusive character designs. In this space, I was both observer and participant (Hine 2015). Though everyone knew I was conducting research, I was welcomed simply as another enthusiast, drawn in by genuine curiosity about their art and the stories it tells.

I spent three months in this space learning about digital art, meeting people, and playing games. I went there three times a week. My visits typically occurred around midday when students were available to socialise and collaborate. This was the time after their classes where they got to work on their assignments together and this entailed collaborative creations of 3D

art like 3D characters and gaming environments. Pata, who became a central figure in my research, introduced me to his peers, fostering a sense of belonging within the space. My familiarity with some of the students further enhanced rapport and facilitated my integration into the gaming group. Together with Pata and Suzaku, I spent considerable time playing games such as God of War and *Apex Legends*, as well as engaging in thought-provoking discussions on art, gaming, and creativity. These interactions provided valuable insights into the motivations and thought processes of game creators, deepening my understanding of the cultural and intellectual frameworks that underpin their work. Throughout my fieldwork, I employed inductive coding to analyse the data collected from interviews and participant observations. This method, described by Saldaña (2021, 187) and Fereday et al. (2006, 82), allowed me to identify themes emerging directly from the data I got in the field. By engaging in iterative cycles of coding and recoding, I ensured that the analysis remained dynamic and reflective of participants' lived experiences. This approach aided me in identifying themes that emerged directly from the data, rather than imposing preconceived categories. For example, themes such as identity reconstruction and creative collaboration emerged organically as participants shared their stories. The iterative coding process led to significant shifts in my initial thematic framework, highlighting the dynamic nature of qualitative research. This evolution marked a turning point in my study, as new ideas and perspectives emerged directly from the data (Fereday et al. 2006; Saldaña 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were a cornerstone of my research methodology, particularly given the personal and sometimes sensitive nature of the topics discussed. Obtaining informed consent from participants was paramount. Before commencing interviews and ethnography, I provided participants with detailed information sheets explaining the study's objectives, methods, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any point without repercussions (Bryman 2016; Wiles 2013, 25). This ensured that participants were fully aware of how their data would be used and stored. Confidentiality and anonymity were also central ethical concerns. Participants were assured that their identities would remain protected using pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying information was excluded from the final report. Hence, all the names that I used in this research are not the real names of my participants. This approach aligns with established ethical guidelines in qualitative research (Wiles 2013, 42). Furthermore, I remained vigilant about power dynamics during interactions, striving to create a space where participants felt comfortable and respected. For example, I adopted a

conversational tone during interviews to encourage open dialogue and reduce hierarchical barriers.

Navigating online interviews introduced additional ethical complexities, such as ensuring data security and maintaining privacy in virtual spaces. I chose Microsoft Teams for its robust security features, including encrypted communication. However, I also reminded participants to choose private, secure locations for interviews to minimise the risk of eavesdropping or interruptions. These measures reflect the evolving nature of research ethics in the digital age (Convery and Cox 2012, 51). Additionally, I regularly reviewed and updated my data management practices, ensuring compliance with institutional guidelines and best practices for safeguarding digital records. By combining semi-structured interviews, virtual engagement, and immersive participant observation, my methodological approach provided a holistic lens through which to explore the interplay of identity, creativity, and social interaction in virtual spaces. These methods, supported by robust analytical practices and a commitment to ethical research standards, enabled me to capture the complexity and richness of participants' lived experiences. Through this, I developed my own theoretical framework.

Hybrid Identity Construction Framework

This thesis advances what I call the Hybrid Identity Construction Framework. The framework fuses structural analyses of Johannesburg's digital infrastructures established theoretical lenses (from virtual realism to intersectionality), and the concrete affordances of MMORPGs. The framework signals that identity emerges from the dynamic interplay of virtual and physical realities, rather than from any single dimension alone, which is why I chose to use the term 'Hybrid'. I use this framework to bring into focus how Johannesburg's distinctive urban environment and South African gaming trajectories shape and are shaped by virtual engagement. Attending to the structural context recognises that access to digital worlds in the city is neither uniform nor incidental. Urban inequalities in broadband rollout, console acquisition, and the emergence of grassroots incubators such as the Tshimologong Precinct all mediate who plays and on what platforms and thus whose voices become legible in online gaming spaces (Penix-Tadsen 2019). By rooting the framework in these material and institutional realities, the research avoids treating virtuality as a placeless domain; instead, it traces how local infrastructures and socio-economic stratifications determine not only who can create avatars but what kinds of identities those avatars can plausibly enact.

Informing this framework are the four theoretical lenses that guide the analysis. *Virtual realism* insists that in-game practices have their own emergent social logics, subject to ethnographic scrutiny as actual spaces rather than mere reflections of offline life (Chalmers 2017; Burbules 2006). *Postcolonial hybridity*, as articulated by Homi Bhabha (1994), highlights how cultural meaning and identity are negotiated in the "in-between" spaces created by colonial histories, producing new, mixed forms of subjectivity that are neither purely local nor wholly global. *Cultural identity production* positions avatars as sites where personal and collective histories intersect in ongoing negotiation (Hall 2015). *Intersectionality* reveals how axes of difference, including race, gender and class, interlock in digital self-expression, granting some players privileged mobility while circumscribing others' creative freedom (Crenshaw 1991). Finally, *digital anthropology* offers the methodological tools to treat online communities and rituals as valid field sites, enabling a comparative reading of MMORPG guilds alongside Johannesburg's Street-corner networks (Boellstorff 2008; Hine 2020).

While each theory gives us useful insights, none on its own can explain what I see in Johannesburg's gaming communities. Virtual realism shows how games develop their own social rules, but without accounting for my observations of uneven broadband in different suburbs and the cost of consoles, laptop and mobile phones; it makes digital worlds seem available to everyone. While avatars carry personal and shared histories, as we can infer from Cultural Identity Theory, there is a void that my discussions revealed regarding the lack of access to gaming materials or even data. This void in the theory speaks to a broader problem where the digital space is largely ignored by postcolonial theories that are focused on the socioeconomic realties in the physical world and not the implications for virtual ones. Intersectionality highlights how race, gender, and class affect players, but if we only look at these issues in the digital realm, we miss how they combine with Johannesburg's patchy infrastructure to include some people and leave others out.

Likewise, digital anthropology's focus on online rituals and communities calls for deep ethnographic work, but without looking at physical structures it risks treating the virtual as 'placeless'. In Johannesburg, local centres like the Tshimologong Precinct, internet cafes and new broadband co-operatives like Vuma and City of Johannesburg WIFI, change access right at street-corner level. To understand how identities form, we need all four approaches together – using fieldwork in local neighbourhoods, placing avatars in their historical and power-filled contexts, and following how virtual practices loop back into city life. Only then can we see how the online and offline worlds truly shape each other.

Built upon these lenses, the framework's third and fourth domains capture the virtual mechanisms and processes of identity work that animate the gaming experience. Avatar customisation – from phenotypic traits such as skin tone and body type to class choices and skill-tree configurations affords players a palette for self-portraiture and experimentation. These affordances enable three intertwined processes: exploration, where gamers try on alternate selves or transgressive identities; negotiation, in which players reproduce or contest real-world hierarchies through in-game interactions; and community formation, as collective rituals (raids, markets, voice-chat bonding) coalesce into enduring solidarities that often bleed into offline networks.

Finally, the Hybrid Identity Construction framework emphasises outcomes and feedback loops, highlighting how virtual-world practices translate back into Johannesburg's social and economic fabric. Skills honed in avatar-driven collaboration, strategic planning, leadership, digital artistry – become entrepreneurial capital in local creative industries and university incubators. Social networks forged in guilds morph into real-world peer cohorts and technological innovations, as educators adapt MMORPG-inspired teamwork models for classroom use (Mamotheti and Daramola 2020). In turn, these emergent practices reshape the very infrastructures and norms that originally structured access, completing a reflexive cycle in which virtual and physical realms co-constitute one another.

Thesis Overview

My study is structured around three core chapters, each of which examines a critical aspect of virtual engagement. The first chapter interrogates the complicated nature of anonymity and its influence on both virtual and urban social spheres. I will draw mostly from my participants in this chapter and will use their accounts as MMORPG players based in Johannesburg to examine how anonymity facilitates diverse modes of self-reinvention and community formation and how the structural and infrastructural context shapes the online experience. I will build on from theories from scholars such as Nakamura (2013), Turkle (1995) and Suler (2004) to analyse how online gaming spaces provide a platform where players, through avatars and game tags, negotiate identity, emphasising merit and skill over traditional markers of social standing. In sharp contrast, the chapter will also show how anonymity creates mistrust and vulnerability, forcing individuals to create protective strategies in their daily interactions whenever they are encountered with unfamiliar or external stimuli, especially when the stimuli is an unknown

human. By weaving together, the rich experiences of my participants, this chapter will highlight the ambivalent dynamics of anonymity, demonstrating how its liberatory potential in digital realms is often counterbalanced by its capacity to exacerbate social exclusion and toxicity in real world contexts.

The second chapter explores virtuality as an extension of reality, investigating how MMORPGs reflect and amplify real-world social and cultural dynamics within the context of Johannesburg. Through immersive virtual landscapes, players engage in world-building, community formation, and the negotiation of societal norms, revealing the fluid interplay between physical and digital existence.

The third chapter delves into the process of identity reconstruction through avatars. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theories of cultural identity and intersectionality by Crenshaw (1991), this chapter analyses how players use avatars to navigate race, gender, and other identity markers in a post-apartheid and postcolonial context. Through ethnographic accounts of participants such as Pata and Suzaku who utilise avatars for self-expression, creative exploration, or subversion of societal norms, I examine the complexities of virtual embodiment. These participants will be given in-depth introductions in the chapters that follow.

Chapter One: Anonymity

Introduction

Johannesburg's gaming culture thrives within the walls of the Digital Arts building at Wits University. The exterior of the building is bland and bare face brick, the only thing alluding to the creativity inside being the giant glass door on the far left of the building. That door is see-through, so usually, when you are standing outside, you get to see students and staff members working on their projects. The building's depressing outside appearance conceals the nature of the environment that is encapsulated within it. When you enter the Digital Arts building, it is usually brimming with life and excitement. The space is usually busy, with undergrad and postgraduate students attending most of their classes in the morning and having the rest of the day to work on their projects or to even play video games. Inside is a hive of creativity – from the way the people who attend classes dress to the nature and tone of the conversations they have there. That this building gives out a confusing and misleading look towards the people who only view it from the outside resonates with my understanding of anonymity or the state of being anonymous.

Like this building that presents a warped and confusing sense of identity, anonymity usually conceals our true selves, enabling us to put on a façade if not an alternate version of our selves. Like this building, when you are playing online with people that you do not know, all you rely on is the physical appearance of the avatar, the way that avatar plays and progresses, and, what the person behind the avatar says through the chat function or direct communication through microphones. This concealment of identity in gaming spaces often raises questions about authenticity and performance. Are players genuinely expressing who they are, or are they just creating personas that fit the expectations of the digital landscape? The ability to shift between different identities in virtual spaces brings both freedom and complexity. To some, anonymity provides the freedom to escape societal norms, and they can find new things about themselves without fear of punishment. To others, the disconnection between the virtual and the real results in a lack of responsibility, with responsibility fading into play and hurtful dialogue. This dual nature of anonymity – acting both as an empowerment tool and as a producer of deviance – is a vital element in the gaming experience.

This chapter shall initially delve into the concept of anonymity through a review of existing scholarly literature, before examining several lived experiences that have been shared by my participants in relation to anonymity. Here, we will be engaging with scholars such as Nakamura (2013), Turkle (1995), Dietrich (2013) who all give us a conceptual lens with which to view and understand anonymity. In this section of the discussion, the focus shall shift to gamer tags and the way they are essential in maintaining anonymity in gaming environments. Finally, we will explore several of the social dynamics that are created by having no knowledge of the actual identities of other players during these games, and what we can learn from such an environment. To properly assess the influence of anonymity in gaming communities, an examination of the larger context by which people, specifically those from Johannesburg, approach and perceive the use of anonymity, and how they leverage its benefits in the gaming community, is important.

Background of anonymity

Anonymity in virtual environments, particularly online gaming spaces, has been a significant area of academic inquiry. Scholars have debated its impact on social interactions, community building, and behavioural shifts among players. While theories such as Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical model and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory are helpful in describing self-presentation, group processes, and identity formation, this chapter primarily applies Suler's (2004, 321) "online disinhibition effect" to describe how anonymity affects interactions within gaming spaces. Suler (2004, 322) explains that "The dissociative anonymity provided by online settings allows individuals to be themselves in ways they might suppress in face-to-face interaction". This dynamic is particularly evident in online gaming, where the absence of real-world responsibility can create both profound self-expression and antisocial behaviour. In the view of Dietrich (2013, 83), the virtual world enables participants to "test social boundaries with little fear of consequences", a process which demonstrates the two-faced nature of anonymity in shaping digital interactions.

The concept of anonymity has long been entangled with issues of identity and action, changing in meaning across changes in technological contexts. Simmel (1908) originally characterised anonymity as a feature of modern urban existence, a state that liberated individuals from the burden of social monitoring while simultaneously dissolving interpersonal relationships. In virtual worlds, Nakamura (2013) and Turkle (1995) extend this discussion, situating virtual worlds as arenas where anonymity facilitates playful identity–allowing users to experiment with self-presentation unfettered by the constraints of the real world. But while

most of this literature concentrates on identity transformation, this chapter directs attention to the social dimensions of anonymity. Suler's (2004) online disinhibition effect is a key insight here, demonstrating how anonymity not only loosens behavioural constraints but also re-calibrates social interaction. In this view, the absence of immediate repercussions promotes both constructive interaction and more toxic, hostile interactions, illustrating the double-edged sword of online anonymity.

Social Interactions and the Online Disinhibition Effect

Anonymity in online gaming serves as both a bridge and a battleground for social interaction, influencing how players connect and sometimes clash. Taylor (2006, 87) points out that it can create strong social bonds, enabling players to have open conversations and form friendships that are not limited by geography. Yee (2007; 2020, 106) builds on this idea, noting that players in MMORPGs often share personal information they might keep to themselves in the real world. This is a concept Suler (2004, 322) describes as benign "disinhibition", where anonymity encourages openness and self-expression. But anonymity has drawbacks as well. By claiming that "griefers (Players who actively harass other gamers in order to ruin their enjoyment of the game) take advantage of the lack of accountability in online games to disrupt social order and enjoyment", Consalvo (2009, 129) draws attention to this darker side of the issue. Dietrich (2013), supports this idea by showing how some players feel empowered to act in antisocial ways, such as trolling or excessively competitive behaviour, in the absence of real-world repercussions. This problem, which Suler (2004, 323) calls "toxic disinhibition", exemplifies the continuous conflict between anonymity's capacity to promote social bonds and its propensity to produce toxicity. This tension is a key characteristic of virtual spaces and extends beyond gaming, as we will see when discussing anonymity in Johannesburg later in this chapter.

Anonymity and Community Building in Gaming

While there are certainly challenges, anonymity can also create inclusive communities. Taylor (2006, 112) points out how players in *World of Warcraft* use anonymity to form connections

based on shared interests instead of real-world identities. Similarly, Nardi (2010, 54) shows that gaming guilds thrive on trust and cooperation, proving that anonymity does not prevent meaningful relationships from forming. Harrell and Harrell (2012, 90) stress the importance of avatars in shaping social interactions, suggesting that players utilise avatars not merely as extensions of self but as tools for navigating social hierarchies in anonymous environments. This indicates that anonymity does not erase identity; instead, it transforms how we engage socially through virtual representations.

By bridging the divide between anonymity and social presence, avatars allow players to interact with others without the prejudices of the physical world and yet form real connections. Anonymity therefore re-maps social formations instead of eliminating them, creating new kinds of interaction that are frequently driven by common gaming experiences rather than conventional social markers like socioeconomic status, race, or gender. The ability to adopt multiple personalities through avatars generates a special kind of friendship on the internet where individuals form bonds based on trust, expertise, and cooperation more than static social hierarchies. Accordingly, anonymity in gaming space is not against social cohesion but serves to give birth to fresh ways of bringing about communities, hence supporting the position that internet use can be just as sociologically significant as that which originates from real world contexts – Johannesburg in my study.

Anonymity in Johannesburg

Johannesburg also known as Jozi, a culturally diverse city that I call home, thrives on physical human interactions – interactions that are often more fluid when individuals know something about each other, or have some form of prior connection. In a case where you are meeting someone for the first time, usually there are mutual connections that help facilitate the encounter and the engagement like having a mutual friend, or a work colleague who is introducing you to his other friends. In my experience, in Joburg interactions among people are usually better when there is something common or there is someone common that both parties know because trust among people is a problem in Johannesburg. There is lack of trust and high levels of anxiety because people fear getting hurt or deceived by strangers (Falkof and van Staden 2020). People are often afraid of getting scammed and conned, or of getting robbed because of the high rates of crime.

This pervasive anxiety shapes the very social fabric of Jozi; as Simone (2004, 411) observes, the complex interweaving of everyday social ties effectively constitutes the city's infrastructure, binding residents into adaptive networks of care and caution. Simone (2004,

413) further argues that, in the absence of reliable public services, residents themselves become the architects of provisional systems transforming informal economies, shared living spaces and reciprocal favours into lifelines that underpin urban survival. He emphasises that these improvised infrastructures not only mitigate risk but also foster novel solidarities, even as they lay bare the uneven distribution of security and resources across the city. Similarly, Nicky Falkof and Cobus van Staden (2020, 4) emphasise how inner-city dwellers continually negotiate insecurity through everyday practices of vigilance and guarded sociability. They extend this analysis by highlighting how residents develop "vernacular security practices" – behaviours such as travelling in pairs, establishing neighbourhood watch signals, and using coded language to disclose or conceal personal information to navigate public spaces perceived as dangerous (Falkof and van Staden 2020, 6). They note that these practices create informal codes of recognition and trust that substitute for absent formal protections, while simultaneously reproducing social boundaries and exclusions that map onto class and racial divisions.

So, in this context, somebody being anonymous would be a huge issue for interaction because of those blurred lines of trust. Usually, people who conceal their identities in Johannesburg are seen as professional scammers because of the suspect way they present themselves through concealing their own identities. This sentiment was also emphasised when I conversed with Olive, who is also a Game Design and Animation student at the Wits digital Arts department. She loves playing *Apex Legends (Battle royale style game),* and she strives to be the best at it although she regards herself as a bad player. She is, however, really good at the game and that is the game we played most of the time on her laptop at the digital arts building. She loves gaming, but she wants to do animation. She finds animation easier than gaming and she feels like she has more chances of making it in Animation than in Gaming. When we spoke about her experience in Johannesburg compared to her experience in the virtual gaming world, she had this to say:

> Even in the streets of *Braam* or at *Small Street* where I usually go to buy some of my clothes, or Dragon City where I get my hair, you always must keep in mind not to speak to a stranger because that same stranger might be somebody who is trying to steal from you or scam you in a way. Even when I walk, I always wear my headsets and mind my own business. I become very anxious once a random person that I do not know approaches me, especially when it is a man. Trusting people let alone strangers in Johannesburg is a hard thing to do because someone is always looking for something from you and its worse when it is a stranger with the power to take it from you. In online

> environments, we rarely care about who you are unless you start becoming problematic to the people in the game. For example, you start harassing people and all that. Nobody feels anxious about playing with random strangers online, well not anyone that I know of.

Olive's quote corroborates my argument by referring to the tension between anonymity, trust, and social interaction – within virtual game communities as well as within Johannesburg itself. Olive's experience within places like Braamfontein and Small Street is a testament to this reality. Here, not knowing others is typically the equivalent of vulnerability. Anonymity in Johannesburg is dangerous; in comparison, in gaming anonymity may be a source of security.

What is notable to me is how Olive defines the need for protective behaviours – using headsets, not meeting people's gaze, and avoiding talk with strangers. This echoes how individuals within online communities delicately build and manipulate virtual identities distancing from their real-life selves to preserve safety or strategy. Within Johannesburg, however, this separation is not something exercised but something survived. It is hard to build trust, and social interactions tend to happen with mutual acquaintances in the middle. With no basis to be discovered in common – no acquaintance, work environment, or neighbourhood – anxiety and distrust reign instead. This is especially interesting to think about when contemplating the contrast between gaming spaces, where conversation tends to begin under pure anonymity but eventually establishes very close social connections.

This also links back to my previous metaphor of the Digital Arts building. Just as the outside of the building hides the creativity and colour within, Johannesburg's social landscape requires the same type of hiding. The longer you are in Joburg, the more you notice that individuals put forward a guarded version of themselves and restrict or are cautious of engaging with others to obviate risk. In gaming and in Johannesburg, anonymity organises how people navigate social space, though in extremely different ways. In gaming, it holds out the potential for self-discovery and reinvention; in Johannesburg, it mandates distance and self-guarding.

This duality only makes my argument stronger – that anonymity is a complex force – one that can liberate and that can alienate, depending upon the context in which it is operating. Anonymity is liberating within game environments, as gamers can remake their selves without being judged. But anonymity is not a liberating force within Johannesburg but rather a source of anxiety and distrust. Olive's specific fear of male strangers underscores the gendered dimension of urban anonymity. Beebeejaun (2017, 323) informs this argument by stipulating that public spaces are not neutral; women experience them through a lens of potential violence

and social control, shaping everyday mobility and interaction in deeply gendered ways. In Johannesburg, where high crime rates intersect with entrenched patriarchal norms, women's bodies are frequently subjected to scrutiny and threat in public spaces. Olive's strategy of using headphones and avoiding eye contact can thus be understood not only as a personal coping mechanism but also as a form of gendered spatial negotiation, a way to claim space while minimising exposure to male dominance and possible aggression. This highlights the intersection between anonymity and gender, where the stakes of being visible or invisible shift dramatically depending on one's positionality within the urban terrain. This complexity becomes even more pronounced when viewed through the lens of intersectionality, which reveals how overlapping identities such as race, gender, and class shape the ways individuals experience and enact anonymity. In Johannesburg, for instance, a young Black woman like Olive may encounter anonymity as a gendered risk, whereas in virtual spaces, that same identity might be temporarily obscured, granting her new forms of agency. Thus, anonymity is never experienced uniformly, it is mediated by one's position within intersecting systems of power and privilege, both online and offline.

Anonymity and the Shaping of Virtual Social Dynamics

The way that gamers relate – through friendship, competition, or hostility – is shaped by the protective cover of anonymity (Suler 2004, 321). It may not be in a holistic sense, such that anonymity is the leading contributor to this dynamic between gamers and the virtual world, but it plays a crucial role in how players engage with the game and the sense of confidence that is fostered by being anonymous. Pata, a charismatic Digital Arts student and passionate gamer, as *Lord Shinzo Sakai* battles through the *Elder Scrolls* with high confidence because he knows that what matters is his skill level, the accolades he has acquired within the game and his social reputation within the game instead of who he is in real life or what kind of physical attributes his character has (Dengah and Snodgrass 2020, 267). *Elder Scrolls (ES)* was one of the best games I had the privilege of playing with Pata and Suzaku, a meticulous designer and thoughtful participant. Utlwa, a vibrant animation enthusiast with a strong presence in both gaming and storytelling, rarely plays *Elder Scrolls* although she had a lot to say about the game and its aesthetics. Sina, a more casual gamer who gravitates towards mobile platforms, prefers playing mobile games most of the time, although we have played *Elder Scrolls* with her before. The *Elder Scrolls* is a collection of role-playing games designed by *Bethesda Game Studios*.

Each game within this series' fictional universe is set on a continent called *Tamriel*. The game combines pre-medieval real-world features, such as the empire who might could rival that of Rome, with high fantasy medieval themes–it really is an amazing game to play. Pata mentioned a situation where he met the same player across different games through the interlink of the servers, they were both connecting to. He says that when they met in *Call Of Duty (COD)*, he was bad at the game and this player kept trash-talking him. He says that coincidentally, they both met in *Elders Scroll Online (ESO)* which is part of the Elders Scroll series. When they met this time around, he was able to win and defeat him more times than he could count. While telling me this story he said:

> My king, here we do not know each other in these games and quite frankly we do not care about each other that deeply, unless if you build your own genuine connections with some of the players you meet in the lobbies of different games. Trust me, if we knew each other, we would not say half the things we say to each other in these games, sometimes, you just wish you could slap a person. Everyone finds meaning in staring at a screen with so much commotion and chaos and we all agree that if you are a great player and have the track record to prove it, then you are awesome and respectable. So if I am a nerd in real life that people find wimpy or unamusing – if I am good in the game that I am playing and if I can prove my worth to other players, then I will be revered nonetheless – meaning me being a nerd means nothing in this space. Hence when this guy kept trash talking me in COD, he was confident because he knows that I do not know him, I only know his skill and that gives me the same level of confidence when my skills are also shown in the game, mostly when I win. Because we all do not know each other, our skill becomes the one thing we all derive our confidence from and aspire to cultivate.

This anecdote illustrates how dissociative anonymity in gaming fuels both disinhibition (hostile trash-talk) and meritocratic self-confidence (Kowert et al. 2014, 450). Pata's reflection aligns closely with my broader argument about anonymity in gaming and how it fosters unique social interactions distinct from real-world dynamics, particularly those in Johannesburg. His statement perfectly expresses how your reputation, competence, and ability to prove your value within the game's rules are what really matter in gaming contexts; your identity outside of the game is not really important. This contrasts sharply with Johannesburg's social environment, where people's interactions and level of trust are frequently influenced by their identity, background, and connections (Phillips 2025). Pata finds that he feels empowered by the anonymity that gaming provides. It strips away external judgments based on real-world identity markers, such as physical appearance, social status, or personal history, and replaces them with a meritocratic system where only skill and experience matter (Meriläinen and Ruotsalainen 2024, 6). He said that based on his experience, no matter how much you trash talk someone or

how much you harass them, when their skill is better than yours it is simply just better and that will not change because you decided to say a few bad remarks. His anecdote about encountering the same player across different games reinforces this idea. In *Call of Duty*, he was at a disadvantage, ridiculed for his lack of skill, but when the dynamic shifted in *Elder Scrolls Online*, where he was more proficient, his in-game ability granted him respect. This fluidity of status, dictated solely by performance, highlights the liberating potential of anonymity – it allows players to reinvent themselves and earn recognition in ways that might not be possible in their offline lives.

This ties back to the broader theme of my chapter: anonymity as a double-edged sword. In Johannesburg, where anonymity breeds suspicion and fear, it creates barriers to social interaction. People prefer to engage with those they can place within their existing social networks, as trust is difficult to establish without common connections as also seen in Olive's quote. But in gaming spaces, anonymity creates a level playing field where social hierarchies based on real-world biases can be temporarily dismantled (Suler 2004, 325). The fact that Pata's worth in the gaming world is tied to his skill rather than his real-life persona speaks to the way virtual environments enable a kind of self-reconstruction – one that is based on ability rather than external perception. So, when I began this research, I was mostly focused on how the community dynamics in online gaming spaces were facilitated by the racialised physical appearance of an avatar that a player uses. But as I spent more time in the different games and playing with different participants, I can say that race is nothing but one dynamic amongst others. Yes, there are instances where people use racial slurs and attribute meaning to the physical features of an avatar, but more often than not, community dynamics in gaming spaces are facilitated by skill above all else (Phillips 2025, 5). Other factors such as race are subsidiary contributors but not the main determinant of how dynamics and virtual social interactions are formed in online gaming spaces. This realisation further supports my argument that while anonymity can strip away real-world biases, it does not eliminate the demand for continuous proof of competence (Meriläinen and Ruotsalainen 2024, 7).

However, this also raises questions about the extent to which this anonymity-driven meritocracy is truly liberating. While gaming spaces allow for reinvention, they also demand constant proof of skill. Pata's experience suggests that while his identity as a 'nerd' in real life might not matter in the game, his standing is still contingent on his ability to perform. This mirrors broader structures of competitiveness, where anonymity may remove social biases but does not necessarily eliminate the pressures of proving oneself. Pata's insight reinforces my argument that anonymity does not function the same way across different contexts. In

Johannesburg, it isolates and restricts interactions, while in gaming, it offers an alternative form of social validation. But even in gaming, anonymity is not absolute freedom – it simply shifts the criteria by which individuals are judged and valued.

While this section of the chapter emphasised how skill, due to anonymity becomes a valuable factor for social recognition within the virtual spaces, Olive once also brought up a social change that results from skill and that is the dismantling of age as a factor for respect and knowledge. She said that:

> Usually here in South Africa and in the most parts of the world for that matter, we believe that the older you are the more knowledgeable or wiser you are about life and some of the challenges that come with it. Your *malume*[uncle], your *Mkhulu*or *Makhulu* [grandfather or Grandmother], or even your parents, by virtue of them being older and more experienced, they are afforded the upmost respect, especially in the African community. However, in the virtual space, your grandmother, grandfather or your parents are simply other players who by virtue of their age and experience are likely to know less about gaining than you as a young person. Those expectations of respect and cordiality are thrown out the window and this is hard because sometimes when I play with my dad, I sometimes forget that he is the adult.

Olive's words encapsulate the revolutionary disruption virtual spaces bring to traditional hierarchies of respect and authority. In asserting that "your grandmother, grandfather, or your parents are simply other players," she refers to the ways gaming spaces eliminate the reverence of seniority. In the world, elders are knowledge reservoirs and should be honoured, but in the virtual world, experience in the game itself – not life – is the foundation of stature (Phillips 2025, 7). Such a reversal of respect demonstrates how expertise, rather than ascribed social roles, is the foundation of acknowledgment and defies age-old societal norms. Her self-reflection, particularly when she admits to forgetting that her father is "the adult" while playing games, is proof of the cognitive dissonance one experiences when social frameworks do not translate to virtual interactions. This forgetting reveals that while players may still have cultural expectations within the game, the virtual world's rules force them to adapt to novel modes of engagement. Anonymity also operates to facilitate this transition; free of the identification markers of everyday life, age no longer confers status and only demonstrated competence is left as a measure of skill (Dengah and Snodgrass 2020, 270). To this extent, gaming is a site of social experimentation, one in which long-standing hierarchies can briefly be dismantled.

Within the context of the chapter more generally, Olive's perspective undergirds the argument that virtual world skill-based social orders function independently of those real-

world frameworks that organise power and respect. This contradicts the idea that identity is static, demonstrating instead how virtual spaces enable fluidity in social roles. The effect of anonymity, therefore, is not merely about hiding – it reconfigures the way people interact with one another, breaking down strict social boundaries and forging new, meritocratic patterns of interaction. This insight maps directly onto Stuart Hall's argument that cultural identities are not fixed essences but "positions of enunciation", produced through ongoing practices and representations (Hall 2015, 392). In the gaming context, anonymity becomes one of those practices by which players continuously negotiate and re-articulate who they are, moment to moment, in relation to their performance rather than any prior biography.

Toxic Inhibition

The anonymity afforded by digital gaming spaces creates an environment where players feel detached from the ethical and emotional consequences of their actions. This detachment is central to the phenomenon of toxic online disinhibition, where the absence of real-world accountability fosters aggression, hostility, and dehumanisation (Suler 2004, 322). When identity is obscured, players are less likely to perceive others as real people with emotions, instead reducing them to mere avatars within a game world. This erosion of empathy facilitates toxic behaviours such as verbal abuse, trolling, and harassment, particularly in competitive and multiplayer settings (Kuznekoff and Rose 2013, 551).

One of the key mechanisms driving toxic online disinhibition is the perceived lack of consequences. Unlike face-to-face interactions, where individuals must confront the immediate reactions of others, online anonymity enables players to engage in behaviour they would typically suppress in physical spaces (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012, 434). The absence of direct social feedback weakens the inhibitions that usually regulate aggressive conduct. In gaming spaces, where identity is malleable and easily discarded, this problem is exacerbated. A player who can change their username, switch avatars, or abandon an account altogether faces little risk of accountability for their actions (Chester and Lasko 2020, 107). As a result, toxic interactions become not only common but also normalised within certain gaming subcultures.

This detachment from accountability was highlighted by Utlwa, a former Game Design student in the Wits Digital Arts department, who also enjoys playing video games, especially MMORPGs. Although she was once enrolled in Game Design, her passion is mostly animation, and she feels like this aspect of digital arts is what she is talented at; hence she chose to

specialise in it. She did Game Design in her first and second year and she says that usually the games she would design would be games that are prescribed by the department and this can range from a simple roadblocks game to something like *Candy Crush*. As a proud Black woman, her mission with her games and her stories is to represent African Black women. So, in her designs especially in animation, she usually tries to create African-themed stories. One of her stories is about a princess who finds it hard to deal with the fact that she is to be a queen. However, she looks like her evil great-great-great-great grandmother, which makes other people think that she will follow in her grandmother's footsteps. She wrote a whole mini story about this animation script.

In another story, one of her characters defies the rules of her school as she finds them dehumanising and unethical. She goes through this transformation journey where she must accept who she is and who she can become. In the end, she becomes a popular person in school who is revered by her peers. Animation and gaming according to Utlwa, go hand in hand because they are both still virtual art. They both require world building, storytelling and character development. The difference in her opinion between these two forms of art is the interactivity. Games are more interactive as they require one to always create interaction in the game to make the story come to life and this is usually through controlling your avatar while they navigate the story of the game. In animation, the audience is usually an observer more than an active participant. Utlwa also enjoys reading fictional books, for she claims that they let her transfer the creativity she gets from reading fantasies into creating great schemas for her games and her animation stories.

All her life she grew up in Johannesburg and enjoyed staying at home, so that is another reason why she enjoys playing games. She is someone who spends a lot of time in the virtual environment – from playing video games to spending a lot of time on Instagram as well. She comes off as a passionate player who is energetic and very involved when she plays battle royal games, and this is seen in how she reacts to the game by sometimes shouting or screaming or even dancing sometimes when the accomplishment feels amazing. She said that "people would be surprised if they knew the kind of person I am in the video game as compared to who I am in real life". There is a stark difference between the two versions of herself and this is because nobody in the virtual environment knows her real identity or some of the issues that are associated to her real identity; all they know is this super skilled avatar who is always ready for a fight. This shows that being anonymous in virtual. She had this to say:

> Anyways, I feel like anonymity is worse in games because a lot of games use proximity chat, as in you can use your voice in-game and communicate verbally with other players. Players will harass and troll you, worse if you are a female playing a predominantly male game like *Call Of Duty [COD]*. I just know when players report harassers, their complaints do not really do anything because there is no physical evidence of what happened to you unless you videotaped your game session or the situation becomes public, and game developers are trying to save face.

Utlwa's experience reflects how anonymity not only facilitates toxic behaviour but also makes it difficult to hold perpetrators accountable. The fleeting and untraceable nature of voice chat, for example, means that victims of harassment often have little recourse unless they actively record evidence of misconduct. This aligns with broader research on online toxicity, which suggests that when players believe their behaviour cannot be easily documented or traced back to them, they are more likely to engage in harmful actions (Christopherson 2007, 304). Additionally, the gamification of social interactions in virtual environments further reinforces this toxic disinhibition. Within competitive online spaces, other players are often viewed as mere obstacles or tools for progression rather than as human counterparts. This shift in perception enables cruelty to thrive unchecked, as the consequences of one's actions feel distant and inconsequential (Fox and Tang 2017, 161). The result is a culture where interpersonal interactions are transactional, transient, and often devoid of empathy. The ability to reshape and discard digital identities at will further deepens this issue. When players can effortlessly assume new identities, they are emboldened to behave in ways they might otherwise avoid in persistent social contexts (Zimmerman and Ybarra 2012, 7). This fluidity fosters a cycle where anonymity not only permits but actively encourages antisocial behaviour, reinforcing toxic norms that persist across gaming platforms.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how anonymity can be both liberating and isolating, empowering and alienating, protective and risky, through an examination of online game worlds and Johannesburg's urban surroundings. In the virtual world, anonymity allows for unique ways of portraying identity, with users shedding real-world constraints to participate in socially created relationships governed by ability, reputation, and collective experience rather than traditional identifiers. It creates a space where characters like Pata can rebuild their identity, where Olive can interact socially without the stressors of Johannesburg, and where hierarchical structures, such as age-based respect, are momentarily inverted. However, at the same time, anonymity

also provides a cloak that allows toxic behaviour to spread, enabling harassment, disinhibition, and aggression, as seen in Utlwa's experiences.

The dualism of anonymity is particularly stark when placed within the context of Johannesburg, where anonymity is not a condition of freedom but of vulnerability. In contrast to gaming spaces, where a lack of real-world identity builds trust based on in-game accomplishment, the culture of mistrust that dominates Johannesburg renders anonymity a sign of threat. Olive's accounts of walking through the city – her requirement of protection strategies, her hesitation to interact with strangers – contrast so radically with the way she, and so many others, feel comfortable in online areas where names and faces are hidden. Johannesburg requires visibility as a condition of trust, but gaming areas frequently require invisibility as a condition of engagement.

This difference highlights the main argument of this chapter: anonymity must not be viewed as a fixed condition but as an experience that is shaped by the structures, historical situations, and interactions within a given setting. This chapter resists overly simple readings of anonymity as purely a positive or negative influence. It compels us to consider purposefully how computer anonymity does not do away with social structures so much as it reconstitutes them in forms with profoundly real consequences on identity, community, and power. It also underlines the nature of context when discussing anonymity – what anonymity is in Johannesburg is entirely different from what anonymity is when one discusses an online gaming lobby, but they both exhibit the same underlying tension: the precarious balance between freedom and responsibility, between self-expression and social responsibility. By combining digital ethnography and urban anthropology, this chapter not only builds on what we understand of virtual worlds but also offers a window through which to re-think how we enact identity, trust, and interaction in our everyday lives.

The empirical insights provided by this chapter on anonymity directly refine the structural context of my Hybrid Identity Construction Framework by revealing how local infrastructures, ranging from network stability and device access, to the city's pervasive security practices, mediate the anonymity experience. By juxtaposing players' in-game anonymity with their urban survival strategies, we sharpen our analysis of how material conditions in Johannesburg shape virtual engagement. Integrating these findings with Chalmers's (2017) and Burbules' (2006) theories of virtual environments allows the framework to more precisely account for how digital infrastructures actively co-constitute social hierarchies and affective dynamics in online spaces. Moreover, the chapter's interrogation of both liberatory and exclusionary anonymity informs the framework's theoretical lenses,

particularly cultural identity production and intersectionality by illustrating how race, gender and class intersect with anonymity to produce divergent identity-work processes across contexts.

By examining the mechanisms through which anonymity enables exploration, negotiation and community formation, and simultaneously permits toxic disinhibition, this chapter advances the framework's mapping of virtual affordances. It clarifies how anonymity functions as both a strategic tool for self-reconstruction and a potential vector for harm, thereby enriching our understanding of the processes through which avatars mediate power relations. Importantly, the chapter identifies feedback loops in which in-game experiences of trust or harassment translate into offline emotional states, social behaviours and risk management strategies. These insights extend the framework's outcomes domain by showing us how skills, coping strategies and social capital developed under conditions of anonymity feed back into participants' real-world navigation of identity and belonging.

Chapter Two: The Reality of the Virtual

Introduction: Love in an 'Unreal Place'.

On a cold winter's day, Nhlax and I found ourselves sitting on the rooftop of the Rise Building; the cold air nipped at our faces as we overlooked the sprawling Johannesburg skyline. The city stretched out before us, a sea of lights and shadows that seemed to pulse with life. The rooftop was a mix of stark, grey concrete and patches of green, where trees stood tall and defiant against the urban backdrop. We were seated on one of the concrete benches, cold and unyielding, but offering a perfect vantage point to take in the city below. I tightened my jacket and glanced over at Nhlax who was lost in thought, his eyes fixed on the horizon. The steam from our hot drinks swirled up into the air and disappeared into the cold breeze. There was a certain peace in the stillness, but I could sense there was something deeper on Nhlax's mind.

"So, Nhlax," I started, breaking the silence by recalling a conversation he once shared with me, "do you believe in love?"

He turned to me, a thoughtful smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "You know, that's a question I never used to think much about," he began. "But now… yeah, I think I do."

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued by his response. "What changed?"

He chuckled softly; the sound carried away by the wind. "It's kind of a funny story. I met someone – actually, I met her online while playing Fortnite." The surprise must have shown on my face because he quickly continued. "We started playing together a few months back. At first, it was just a random pairing in the game. We were both into it, and we worked well as a team. Overtime, we started teaming up regularly, and our friendship grew from there." He paused, as if recalling those early days with a sense of nostalgia. "One night, we were in the middle of a game, and out of nowhere, she asked if I ever wondered why she was always online. I hadn't really thought about it, but I could tell she wanted to talk, so I asked her about it." Nhlax's gaze drifted out over the skyline as he continued. "She told me that she didn't have many friends in real life. The game was her escape, a place where she could connect with people and just forget about the world for a few hours. I realised then that we weren't just playing a game – we were creating this space where we could both be ourselves, free from everything else." The wind picked up slightly, rustling the leaves of the trees around us. Nhlax's

voice softened as he continued. “We didn’t just play Fortnite, either. We’d switch to GTA Online and go shopping together. It was this weird, fun thing we did – seeing who could dress their avatar the best. I always thought the choices she made for her avatar’s outfits were cool, like she had this unique sense of style that came through even in a game.” He smiled, a warmth in his expression that seemed to chase away the winter chill. “It became this creative outlet for both of us, a way to express ourselves and escape from whatever was going on in our lives. Through all those late-night gaming sessions and conversations, we built this connection that felt real, even though we hadn’t met in person.”

I could feel the depth of what he was sharing and the way their relationship had grown from something virtual into something tangible. “So, you guys decided to meet up?”

“Yeah,” he nodded, the memory lighting up his face. “We finally met in person, and it was like everything clicked. We had already built this foundation, so when we saw each other, it just felt right. It was like meeting someone I’d known for years.” We sat there for a moment, the cold forgotten as the warmth of Nhlax’s story lingered in the air. The skyline of Johannesburg, with its mix of modern skyscrapers and old buildings, seemed to reflect the complexity and beauty of the story he had just shared. The concrete beneath us felt a little less harsh, the trees around us a little more vibrant, as if the themes of creative expression and the desire to escape had coloured our surroundings with new meaning. Nhlax glanced at me, a smile still on his lips. “So, yeah, I guess I do believe in love. It’s just… sometimes it shows up in the most unexpected ways.” As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows over the city, I realised that this conversation, this shared moment on the rooftop, had become a story in itself – a story of connection, creativity, and the unexpected paths that lead us to the people who matter most.

In the heart of Johannesburg, a city pulsating with the rhythms of urban life, a unique love story unfolded within the *virtual space.* Nhlax is a high-spirited young man who is originally from the Northern Cape in Kimberley but mainly grew up in Gauteng in Johannesburg South. He is an artist who has a deep-seated interest in dance and film making. He may not spend most of his time playing games even though he is exceptionally knowledgeable in this space, but whenever he decides to play, he cannot be separated from the game. As is evident in the story above, he and his newfound partner, connected through their Avatars, in virtual world of Fortnite, found solace, companionship, and ultimately, love. Although this may seem remarkable, Nhlax’s experience forms a part of a growing trend – the dissolution of boundaries between virtual and real.

Making use of the Chalmer's (2017) concept of 'virtual realism' and Nhlax's story as a preface, this chapter will try to discuss both spheres in complex relation and show that the virtual can be some kind of expansion of the real, with all the benefits and challenges emerging in this relationship. Their common gaming experiences – from customising their avatars to having meaningful chats – built the groundwork for a bond that manifested itself outside of the virtual environment. This story shows how real human connection can happen even in settings that appear to be artificial. The connection between the virtual and the real, nevertheless, is not always clear-cut. Virtual environments can be open and liberating, but they are also influenced by the social, cultural, and economic realities of the real world. In South Africa, the economic and class landscape influences who does and does not access the online space, with people that fall within the lower striations of the economy mostly accessing games on mobile devices, while the middle and upper striations of the economy access these games through consoles, computers and Virtual Reality tools. A participant's capacity to play games depends on things like their financial situation and access to technology. Furthermore, larger cultural trends such as racism and gender discrimination frequently have an impact on the experiences and content that can be found in virtual worlds.

The interplay of the virtual with the real in this chapter shall delve into how these spheres interrelate with and influence one another. The chapter will investigate how virtual space acts as an extension to our physical world for self-expression, social connectivity, and personal growth. At the same time, we will investigate limitations and challenges of the virtual world, including issues of privacy, inequality through Avatar experience, and addiction. By exploring the relationship between the virtual and the real, we will have a deeper grasp of the role that technology plays in shaping our lives and identities and our understanding of what it means to be human. We can also consider what this may say about the future of human connection, culture, and society. All of this is important to do because it provides a way for us to understand how our humanity is influenced by the existence of new emergent technologies such as MMORPGs, virtual reality, and even the Metaverse – the virtual medium of existence to which people are migrating in high numbers. This space is understood to be the next home for human beings, and by looking at the experiences of people within this space through their virtual conduits, which are avatars, we understand how humans make meaning and connect with each other in relation to the space.

The Virtual World: A Reflection and Refraction of Reality

The virtual world, a computer-generated artificial environment, has become an integral part of contemporary life. Often seen as a mere non-real reflection of the real world, it serves as a space where we can project our desires, fears, and aspirations as is evident through Nhlax's love story. Although he argues against the understanding of virtuality in this manner, Burbules (2006, 162) defines it as a "computer-generated environment" that can simulate experiences or objects. Games often draw inspiration from real-world experiences and narratives. Chalmers (2017, 311-312), although in agreement with the latter, discusses two meanings of the term "virtual." The traditional meaning suggests that "virtual X" means "like X but not actually X," implying virtual reality is not real. The more recent meaning, however, defines "virtual X" as "a computer-based version of X," without judging whether virtual X's are truly X's. For instance, a virtual library could be considered a real library, while a virtual cup is not a real cup. This newer interpretation allows for the idea that virtual reality could be a form of reality, but in digital form. However, by defining virtuality as a computer-generated environment and by understanding video games to be virtual constructs, we risk it being perceived as a place detached from real life (Chalmers 2017, 312). We risk reducing experiences acquired through the interaction with this space to be also virtual and non-real. We risk making these experiences non-existent or of lesser concern than the actual practices that exist in the real world.

This sentiment is evident in how one of my interviewees, Madara, speaks about issues of race within the virtual gaming world. Madara is a first-year engineering student who is partly enrolled in the Digital Arts Department, for the Game Design module. He grew up in Fourways in Johannesburg and he has had plenty of experience with gaming in his life. He grew up playing consoles like PlayStation and enjoys playing computer games as well. He is also a quiet person who likes to keep to himself, which is why, as he explained, he finds comfort in just spending time playing games, especially his personal favourite, *Fortnite*. In our discussion about the dynamics of social engagement in MMORPGs, he had this to say:

> When people think about race in online gaming communities or just gaming in general, especially games that have a lot of graphical rigour, they think of it as being a distant concept that does not hold any significance within the virtual space … they simply think it just exists in real life … well, many of them, not all, I guess. These are usually people who do not have full understanding of the gaming space because they overly romanticise the experience there. Racism takes place in the online space through cyberbullying and trashing a player's Avatar skin colour and associating it to the gamers' real-life identity. Sometimes people are stereotypical towards the kinds of physical traits that your Avatar has but not most of the times though. All of these are

> things that are sometimes overlooked because gaming is seen as this perfect way to waste time or an escape that does good for people's emotional and social well-being but in reality, most players just choose to ignore these things.

While the mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics of games can certainly be seen as representations of our social, cultural, and psychological realities, I argue that they are more than mere reflections – they extend our lives and experiences to a space that needs more than just our material selves to access it. This can be compared to how human beings change their behaviour, looks and sometimes behaviour, just to fit into a new place or a place that requires them to be more than just themselves. When we go to school or church, we wear a uniform. When Astronauts go to space, they need more than just their own oxygen to survive, they need space suits and oxygen masks, but space is still real even though many people have never seen or touched it. Virtual environments are just the same, they are just another place we visit and for us to be able to visit there, we require avatars to do so. They are immersive experiences that can shape our understanding of the world and ourselves, making them as real as any other aspect of our lives (Grimshaw 2014). To ground these theoretical insights in lived experience, the following ethnographic accounts illustrate how individuals navigate, feel, and make meaning within virtual environments, revealing the real emotional, social, and cultural consequences of their digital engagements.

Through the immersive experience facilitated by Avatars, Nhlax was able to create a meaningful worldly romantic relationship with a total stranger. This affected both their lives beyond the virtual, resulting in a new reality that was facilitated by the virtual world. While the environment might seem artificial and non-real, their experience was real, not just to them but also to everyone else who will read this chapter.

Pata was born to two Zimbabwean parents in South Africa and grew up in Braamfontein, a vibrant part of Johannesburg. In his early childhood, he developed a love for computers and what they were able to create. In his adolescence, he discovered that he was good at making art – drawing, painting and even digital art. He taught himself how to code and combined his love for art until eventually, he enrolled in a Digital Arts degree at Wits University. The kinds of games that Pata makes are battle games that involves fights, battle royale and open world exploration. Battle royale games represent a dominant subgenre within the field of online multiplayer video games, distinguished by their competitive, survival-based mechanics. These games are structured around a last-player standing paradigm, wherein participants, either as individuals or within teams, must outlast all opponents to achieve victory.

Currently, he is working on partnering with Xbox, Netflix and PlayStation to get his battle royale style game into market. This resonates with the dominant genre of the kinds of games he plays, these being games such *Apex Legends* and *Elder Scrolls*. This is one of the ways in which the mainly Euro-American schemas of gaming have influenced how African game designers think about and create these artistic virtual games. His story will be further explored in the third chapter where we will engage with him in-depth. In one of our conversations, he stated that, "the battle royale games, popularised by games such as *Fortnite* and *Apex Legends*, can be interpreted as a reflection of our anxieties about survival, competition, and the uncertainty of the future because of the way they engage our senses and instincts as gamers".

These are all emotions that characterise the life in Johannesburg, where the mentality of hustling and working hard for a better future is always imbued by pressure. This point was reiterated upon when I had a conversation with Sina, a young game developer from Soweto who now enjoys playing games as it helps deal with stress, but she also asserts that engaging in this space helps her enhance her creativity. She did not grow up playing games a lot because games were believed to be a male hobby in her neighbourhood and as such girls were not really encouraged to engage in video games. She found herself enrolling for a Game Design degree at Wits and that widened her horizons and exposed her to gaming. In our discussion, Sina stated that:

> Games can sometimes make you feel emotions you would usually feel in the real world like anger, excitement, sorrow … especially when you play a game that induces fear, that sense is also heighted in great lengths. There are games that have infused Virtual Reality (VR) in their games and those are usually even more immersive especially when you play horror-based games. I mean, that is the same fear I feel when I walk in the streets of Braam at night or when a random man approaches me. Sometimes even games that are not infused with VR also make you feel some type of way. They draw your emotions in and hence why sometimes playing war games can put people on edge.

Sina's words effectively reinforce the argument that virtual spaces can be as real and impactful as physical ones. Her recollection of fear because of the imminent threat that men pose is part of the broader reality of the sites of fear women must navigate because of the masculinist and violent mappings of cities like Johannesburg. The intersection between her understanding the fear of men and then juxtaposing it with the expression of that fear in the games is why intersectionality is an important part of this discussion. Women like Sina do not have the luxury of leaving their fears and anxieties behind but must figure out how to wear those emotions when gaming. Her observation that games can evoke genuine emotions, such

as anger, excitement, and sorrow, exemplifies the immersive nature of these virtual experiences. Much like watching a horror movie to feel fear in a safe context, people engage with these games to experience intense emotions without real-world consequences. Whether through suspense, triumph, or loss, players actively seek these emotional encounters. By drawing parallels between the fear induced by horror games and the fear felt when walking alone in a dangerous neighbourhood like Johannesburg, Sina emphasises the point that virtual emotions can have just as much weight and viscerality as real-world ones. Furthermore, Sina's mention of the heightened sense of fear in VR-based horror games further emphasises the immersive potential of virtual environments. This suggests that the virtual world can provide a more intense and immediate experience than the physical world, leading to deeper emotional engagement (Bainbridge 2007, 475). By connecting the virtual and the real in this way, her words support the notion that the two spheres are not mutually exclusive but rather interconnected and capable of influencing each other profoundly (Bainbridge 2007, 475). As Bowman and McMahan (2007, 36) argue, the immersive nature of VR can elicit strong emotional responses from users, as they experience a sense of presence that can enhance their emotional engagement with the virtual environment, further enhancing Sina's claim. Perhaps what is meant here is that such games are one way to negotiate and deal with those fears and anxieties in a controlled virtual environment. The threat of elimination at any moment, the necessity to adapt immediately and constantly to the development of the circumstances – this can all be viewed metaphorically as a representation of real-life challenges.

While the game is mediated through a distant, virtual simulation medium, the motivation behind it is to help a player or gamer enhance their humanness or ability to master something in a real-life setting. This exemplifies the intricate connection between our understanding of what it means to be human and the technological mediums that are human-centric. Even though they may be games, the feeling is real to the person playing it and should also be respected and accepted as real by the rest of society. By human centric, I specifically mean technologies that influence people's experiences and perceptions of their own existence as human beings. Chalmer's (2017, 318) theory of 'virtual realism' speaks directly to this idea, suggesting that the virtual world is not just a pale reflection of the real one, but rather an extension of reality in its own right. These experiences, while mediated through a screen or device, are no less 'real' than those in the physical world (Schöne et al. 2023). This helps us understand why a game that evokes emotions like excitement, fear, or frustration can feel so tangible – it is because these feelings have real emotional and psychological effects on the player.

These are truly immersive experiences that show that a virtual space is as weighted as, if not even more, the real-world experience in shaping perceptions of self and behaviour (Saker and Frith 2020, 1323; Fraser et al. 2025). Another good example of this relationship is role-playing games. Players create avatars and enter fantastic worlds where they experiment with new identities, perspectives, and stories. This idea is central to Chalmers' (2017) theory, the 'virtual' offers us scope to experiment with who we are, to try on new ways of being and engage in values and behaviour that we might not express in the physical world. In this direction, the virtual world doesn't just imitate reality; it enhances such a reality to add depth in understanding oneself and amplifies personal growth and self-discovery.

Yet, the virtual-real relationship is never one-directional. While it is possible to use virtual spaces to attain sensations of release and, in that respect, freedom, virtuality is always deeply intertwined with reality (Petkova and Ehrsson 2008). As Chalmers (2017, 343) helps us see that virtual worlds are part of our hybrid reality, not apart from it. In other words, access to virtual space via physical devices – computers, consoles, phones, or VR headsets – blurs the line between what is real and what is virtual. The virtual can be perceived as a space where Bhabha's (1994) idea of mimicry thrives and repurposes reality to provide simulations that offer a type of freedom and expression that we struggle to conceive in reality. Everything in our physical surroundings, from the tactile feel of a joystick to the visual stimulus of a screen, informs our experience of the virtual, setting up an ecology in which the two domains constantly interact (Fraser et al. 2025).

This hybrid reality becomes further reflected in how virtual experiences may come to influence real life. While a good game can raise self-confidence for a player who then exhibits those traits in more traditional socialising, as noted by Chalmers (2017, 344), criticism or failure within the virtual world may influence a person's mood or integration into the physical one. For Chalmers (2017), the real and the virtual are not two discrete, independent realms that face each other but are somehow in counterpoint and interplay at every point, with one informing and shaping the other. This idea of a mixed reality in virtual worlds closely matches Bhabha's (1994) "third space" in postcolonial studies. Chalmers (2017) tells us that the virtual and the real shape each other, and Bhabha (1994) explains that cultural identity also forms in a no-man's land where colonial and local traditions meet and create something new. In this third space, people develop blended identities by constantly balancing different histories, values and power forces. In the same way, virtual games become places where players combine their own cultures with global gaming trends, creating hybrid selves that draw on both their postcolonial backgrounds and international digital culture. Putting these two scholars together

shows us that virtual worlds are not just an add-on to real life but live "in-between" spaces where postcolonial people can reshape who they are. This interaction dares us to reconsider our understanding of both virtual and physical reality and invites us instead to consider both as parts of the human experience. Most players believe that when they play, their virtual selves are the ones that take centre stage in the whole process (Turkle 2011, 238). They express this virtual self through the usage and customisation of their avatars to elevate, inflate, or alter their sense of self. However, I argue that the concept of a virtual self that exists separately from our physical selves is an illusion. As people who have lives and personalities, we bring our real-world experiences, biases, and emotions to the virtual space.

The way we navigate and act in virtual worlds, the characters we create, and communities with which we participate online are all informed by who we are in the physical world. This embodied virtuality suggests the virtual world is not a disembodied escape but an extension of ourselves shaped by and shaping our physical experiences. This permeability of the virtual-real boundary brings special opportunities and difficulties. While virtual spaces enable individuals to experiment with identities that may be difficult or impossible to express in real life, they also facilitate participation in geographically distant communities. However, these same spaces can allow social issues and forms of prejudice to move fluidly between the virtual and the physical, often with real-world consequences. Regarding online cyberbullying and harassment, cyberbullying indeed made life-threatening situations experienced in the real world, at least for teenagers (Suler 2004, 321).

Finally, there's the way that social conceptions from the physical world are translated to and perhaps transformed by virtual reality: social hierarchies remade through online communities or replaced with new hierarchies that organise participants around shared virtual experience; the virtual world can be a place for trying on different ways of being, rethinking social convention. However, it may turn into an echo chamber of the existing prejudices, stereotypes, and some social hierarchies. The need for encouraging inclusiveness and critical thinking, therefore, comes forth in virtual space as much as in real life.

Shadows of Reality: Unmasking Racial Bias in Online Gaming Spaces

Moddy is a twenty-one-year-old passionate football fan who enjoys playing *Fifa* and *Fortnite*, but his favourite game is *God of War*. He grew up in Hatfield, and he describes his hometown as the "Land of the free" because it offers people who stay there an opportunity to experience everything from leisure, partying, awesome date spots and many more as he described. He refers to himself as a nerd because of how much he likes playing video games, watching anime and watching football. Moddy chose to enrol in the Digital Arts degree to help him combine his passions into one. He wants to specialise in Game Design and hopes to create African-centred games that are evocative and globally renowned. Like his favourite game, *God of War*, he wants to create African centred war-based games. Games that reveal the goriness and the mindset of war through an African perspective, like recreating Shaka Zulu's story of conquest through the games and to depict how Africa was before it was colonised because he does not believe that Africa was a paradise before it was colonised. He believes it was also violent in its own ways, consisting of wars and other violent atrocities. He noted that as the movie *300* shows how the Persians and the Greeks warred with each other, he wants to depict the same situation here in Africa through video games and a story telling animation. He is currently not at a level where he can facilitate his own solo project; the department still instructs him on what kind of games he can currently create.

Moddy once referred to a scenario where a white player asked someone who was losing against him while using a Black soldier, "Aren't niggas supposed to be strong or something? Guess the manual labour did not do enough to toughen y'all up," and then proceeded to laugh after that. This kind of talk that Moddy spoke of is often dismissed as trash talking – the competitive banter designed to destabilise an opponent – but in this instance, it transcends playful provocation and becomes a mechanism for perpetuating racial stereotypes and discriminatory ideologies. At the outset of this research, I hypothesised that players primarily used an avatar's physical appearance to project racial biases. However, evidence suggests the reality is more nuanced. Critically, I found that race in online gaming extends beyond superficial visual representation; it is often signalled through vocal cues (accents, language choices, or voice chat where most players use their actual voices when communicating with other players in the game), and fundamentally shaped by the attitudes players import into these spaces. Participants emphasised that racism surfaces when biased individuals exploit verbal interactions – using voice chat to weaponise racial assumptions based on speech patterns – turning 'smack talk' into discriminatory attacks. As reiterated, racism is not inherent to gaming until introduced by players, who may infer race through voice alone, thereby poisoning the environment with their preconceived perspectives.

This incident and the perspectives of my participants highlight the ways in which real-world prejudices are carried over into virtual spaces and amplified through online interactions. The fact that such comments mentioned by Moddy occur in environments often perceived as neutral or escapist underscores the persistence of discriminatory attitudes that infiltrate even seemingly non-real domains like online gaming. The visual markers of avatars, such as skin tone or physical traits, become proxies for real-world identities, enabling players to project stereotypes and biases onto others. This phenomenon speaks to the profound entanglement of the virtual and the real, where gaming platforms serve as extensions of societal structures rather than escapes from them. The white player's use of a racial slur and stereotypical assumptions about Black people in Moddy's story is emblematic of how online platforms can replicate and even amplify systemic inequalities. Virtual spaces, often perceived as anonymous and free from accountability, allow discriminatory behaviours to flourish. The anonymity emboldens individuals to express biases they might suppress in face-to-face interactions, creating an environment where toxic behaviours persist unchecked. This bold behaviour demonstrates how virtual anonymity has two sides; it can promote freedom of expression but it can also make harm easier.

The racial dynamics at work in these locations also provide insight into larger power structures. Using a racial insult to denigrate another player is more than simply a way to dominate a game; it is also a way to re-establish past power and control structures. This behaviour reveals how, rather than being utopian zones of equality, virtual worlds frequently reflect and promote real-world disparities. These platforms question the concept that gaming areas operate independently of societal influences. Addressing racism and other forms of prejudice in virtual spaces requires a multifaceted approach. Game developers, community moderators, and players all have roles to play in dismantling these toxic behaviours. Developers can implement stricter moderation tools, robust reporting systems, and clearer consequences for hate speech or discriminatory actions. For example, some developers have introduced machine-learning tools to identify and filter offensive language in real time. These measures, while not perfect, create a foundation for accountability and foster a culture of respect (Schmidt and Wiegand 2017, 2; Wulczyn et al. 2017, 1394).

Game Design is also very important. Including varied representations in avatars, plots, and character narratives can help gamers confront preconceptions and engage with perspectives other than their own. *The Last of Us Part II* which was a common game among my participants, though not African-centred, offers a model for intersectional representation (Crenshaw 2013). One of its protagonists, Ellie, is a young woman who identifies as lesbian. Her sexuality is

neither her only defining feature nor merely a plot device, but one element of a deeply complex character. The game's writing, voice acting and character design work together to normalise LGBTQ+ identities without turning them into tokens.

Representation must go beyond tokenism to be authentic and nuanced, reflecting the complexities of various cultures and identities. Furthermore, game features that encourage collaboration over rivalry can alter player dynamics, creating situations in which positive interactions are valued over destructive activities. While of course there are games that are made specifically to promote competition, even in those games, creators can strive to instil principles of healthy competition. Beyond technical and design interventions, fostering critical awareness among players is crucial. Awareness about the impact of words and actions in virtual spaces can help dismantle the perception that gaming is disconnected from real-life consequences. Participants in my research consistently emphasised that racism arises when individuals bring their personal biases into the game. This underscores the need for broader societal engagement with issues of race and discrimination, as these behaviours are not isolated to gaming but reflect deeper systemic problems. By understanding this intricate dance between the virtual and the real, we can move beyond seeing them as separate entities and instead appreciate the blended reality we now inhabit. Because some of my participants understand the realness of the virtual, they leverage this to better their own lives by finding opportunities in these arenas and creating long meaningful relationships as shown in Nhlax's story. Nobody can deny the realness of Nhlax's relationship, even though it may have started in a space that people understand to not be real. The insights from my participants reveal the potential for gaming spaces to be arenas for critical engagement – not only with the joy and creativity of gaming but also with the broader social issues that define our world.

Ultimately, the difficulties faced by my participants highlight how exclusion and bias are not abstract challenges but are materially experienced through avatar creation, player interaction, and access to community spaces. These virtual tensions are not isolated, they echo the racialised, gendered, and class-based exclusions that structure everyday life in Johannesburg. As the gaming sector slowly expands in South Africa, such experiences suggest that without conscious intervention, the industry risks mirroring the same systemic inequalities found in established Euro-American gaming contexts. Institutions like the Wits Digital Arts department and the Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct play a role in nurturing local talent and encouraging digital experimentation.

Tshimologong Digital Innovation Precinct is a cutting-edge tech hub located in the heart of Braamfontein, Johannesburg. It provides world-class facilities including coworking

spaces, event venues, broadcast studios, maker labs, and high-speed connectivity to support South Africa's digital entrepreneurs. The precinct is home to a thriving community of startups, creatives, and researchers, and hosts regular workshops, bootcamps, and acceleration programs. It serves as a collaborative gateway between African tech talent and global investment, partnership, and market opportunities.

While it was not my main research site, Tshimologong is crucial for this research because it is one of the few spaces in South Africa actively cultivating a digital culture grounded in local identity, creativity, and innovation. Through their stories, Tshimologong becomes a beacon in modelling the hybridity that this research espouses. It is a space that I could not write this research without mentioning in hopes that it highlights its significance in the gaming culture of Johannesburg. As a hub that supports the development of the South African gaming industry, particularly through the Wits Game Design programme, the *Make Games Africa* initiative, it directly engages with how African narratives and identities are being shaped and represented in virtual gaming spaces. Tshimologong offers insights into how Johannesburg-based gamers and designers navigate access, infrastructure, and identity within both local and global gaming networks. It thus becomes another site for understanding the material and cultural conditions that frame my research.

However, my research shows that building infrastructure alone is insufficient. What is equally necessary are reflective practices within gaming cultures that account for who feels visible, heard, and safe in these virtual spaces. If South Africa's gaming ecosystem is to depart from exclusionary precedents, it will need to centre lived experiences of local gamers and creators, particularly those navigating intersecting identities and structural constraints both online and offline.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown that virtual environments are far more than mere non-real reflections of everyday life, rather, they constitute dynamic, immersive spaces in which social, cultural, and emotional realities are both mirrored and remade. Drawing on Chalmers's (2017) distinction between "like X but not X" and "computer-based versions of X", this chapter argued that digital worlds far from being disembodied playgrounds function as extensions of reality, complete with their own social hierarchies, affective resonances, and power dynamics. Through the rooftop conversation with Nhlax, we saw how a relationship born in Fortnite

which is a virtual medium could translate into genuine human intimacy, highlighting how Avatars can mediate real emotional connection. Moddy's reflections on cyberbullying reminded us that avatars' visual traits (skin colour, physical form) are never neutral. They activate and can even amplify prejudices carried over from the offline world. These ethnographic vignettes, situated within Johannesburg's specific economic and cultural landscape, reveal how access to virtual worlds and experiences within digital spaces are always inflected by class, race, and geography. Theoretically, we have demonstrated that virtuality is not simply a reflection of the real but a co-constitutive dimension of hybrid reality. By leveraging Burbules's (2006) computer-generated definition alongside Grimshaw's (2014) and Bainbridge's (2007) emphasis on immersion and emotional presence, the chapter demonstrated how digital interactions can carry genuine tangible weight. This hybridity, where the tactile feel of a VR headset or the social algorithms of an MMORPG become as consequential as physical stimuli challenges any strict binary between virtual and real.

Furthermore, the chapter highlighted that virtual spaces could serve as sites of both liberation and exclusion. While players negotiate new forms of self-expression and community building, they may also encounter the same structural inequalities and toxic behaviours that pervade offline contexts. This duality compels us to view online worlds as arenas for critical engagement, where identity, creativity, and sociality are continuously tested and reconfigured. As we move into Chapter three, which examines avatar creation as a mechanism for identity reconstruction, these insights will serve as our foundation. We will shift from exploring the macro-level dynamics of virtual-real interplay to a focused analysis of how individuals strategically deploy avatars to navigate and reshape the boundaries of gender, race, and belonging. In doing so, we continue our exploration of the profound ways in which digital realms both extend and transform what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.

This chapter holds particular significance for both my participants and Anthropology as a discipline. For the individuals whose experiences form the empirical core of my research, recognising virtuality as a real place validates their digital practices and emotional investments. It acknowledges that their interactions within these worlds carry tangible consequences for social connection, identity formation, and wellbeing. From an Anthropological standpoint, treating virtual contexts as genuine cultural landscapes expands our methodological and theoretical horizons. It demands us to refine ethnographic techniques to account for mediated contexts, adapt our frameworks to grapple with hybrid materialities, and confront the ethical implications of researching fluid, transnational communities. Understanding virtuality as real place thus not only enriches our understanding of contemporary social life but also reaffirms

Anthropology's capacity to document, interpret, and critically engage with the ever-evolving forms of human experience.

These empirical insights substantially advance the Hybrid Identity Construction Framework's structural context dimension by detailing how virtual environments are enmeshed within Johannesburg's material and technological realities. The juxtaposition of Nhlax's rooftop narrative and Madara's account of cyberbullying illustrates that avatars do not inhabit a neutral cyberspace but are always mediated by factors such as broadband variability, device constraints and urban soundscapes. By integrating Chalmers's (2017) virtual realism with concept of computer-generated environments, the framework now captures how digital infrastructures actively shape the affective and social logics of online interaction. Moreover, drawing on Grimshaw's (2014) emphasis on immersion and Bainbridge's (2007) focus on emotional presence, we refine the framework to recognise virtual technologies as co-constitutive agents in identity formation rather than mere conduits for representation. Simultaneously, the chapter's analysis of both the emancipatory potential and the exclusionary dynamics of virtual spaces sharpens the framework's theoretical lenses of cultural identity production and intersectionality. The examples of avatar-mediated intimacy, where players negotiate trust across real-world hierarchies, and instances of online toxicity, where prejudice is magnified, demonstrate how race, gender and class are continuously contested within digital arenas.

Chapter 3: Reimagining Identity: Avatars and Self-Expression in Virtual Worlds

It is 21:00 at Wits University, the cold night air felt as sharp as a malfunctioning refrigerator. Despite wearing multiple layers, the chill in the air crept through my bones, a sharp reminder of the cold wind's bite. Pata, with a loud, excited voice, stood next to me, fully bundled with two hoodies and a jacket to brave the winter night. He laughed heartily at Nhlanhla's joke, with his hands and feet dancing around indicating a surge of excitement coursing through his body, and as his laughter faded, he reached into his pockets and found a box of cigarettes. He pulled out a box of Pall-Mall Red cigarettes and said, "Skyf lighter gents," prompting Nhlanhla to hand him something he can use to light the cigarette. With trembling hands and mist pouring out of his mouth, he tried three times to light the cigarette but only produced sparks that disappeared into the icy winter air. Pausing his attempts, he suddenly asked, "Smash, bro. How did you end up doing your Master's?"

As I stood in front of the digital arts building, my sore back to Holy Trinity Church – a Catholic building with an aura that demands respect, I reflected on my reasons for pursuing a master's in Anthropology. Sergio, a close friend of mine standing diagonally opposite Pata, awaited my response while his fingers running up and down his smartphone screen, perusing his phone for something that he himself was aware of. I replied, "Honestly, bro. I just love people and how they perform the creativity that God gave them through free will. They create culture and make their own rules. We have math and economics, all being parts of a bigger purpose in life. In simple terms, OG, I love learning about people, my G." Pata then shared his journey:

> Angazingawe (I do not know about you) bro, but mina I never even graduated. I dropped out in 2020 due to financial problems. You know how being Black is boi – the bills are always a bit hectic innit? It was rough, macala (my friend), so I had to drop out and focus on other things. I decided to invest in myself and learn more skills like coding and gaming. Endless practice and research helped me learn how to create games properly and how to code, which exposed me to studios via online searches. I also taught myself to create apps and websites. Through gaming, I met many people online who taught me other things.

By the time Pata and I were having this conversation, he was back at Wits as a registered Game Design student. As he was telling me the story, his face lit up with a radiant smile,

indicating that he is proud to tell his side of the story and his efforts at undoing the effects of dropping out. He had come a long way into establishing himself as a gamer and game designer. He spoke about how most of his clientele are international clients, most of which he met online and through gaming.

Pata's experience alludes to how gaming enables players to reconstruct their identities and express themselves in creative ways. By dropping out, Pata was labelled a failure and the stigma of being a dropout stuck with him. He was not seen as an individual who could turn his life around and people often reminded him of what he was. It became part of his identity. He said that in the Black community, failure is not taken lightly and is a point of contention for a lot of families. When he decided to invest more of his time in gaming and virtual space, he started making a living from it. It offered him an opportunity to reconstruct himself both in the virtual world through the various avatars that he created and the real world where he transcended from the label of university dropout to self-made entrepreneur. He saw himself as more than just a young Black man facing a lot of hardships; instead, he opted to present himself as an avatar in the game world who has risen above the struggles associated with blackness and failure in his community.

This chapter will address the dynamic relation between identity and virtual environment, enabled not only by VR but also by other forms of virtual media such as MMORPGs. Virtual worlds, with their particularly immersive characteristics, allow users in a special way to reshape and reimagine the notion of their selves. The chapter is anchored on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, which points out that identity as a continuous process of being rather than a fixed one is influenced by social, historical, and cultural contexts (Hall 2015). Virtual environments in MMORPGs and VR present players with negotiating and shifting of identities through experiments in self-representation, navigating identities that may be dissimilar to those in real life. Using Stuart Hall's (2015) framework helps to unpack how the digital medium functions as a cultural space where identities are constantly being formed and reformed, often in ways that challenge or subvert traditional boundaries of race, gender, and social roles.

The inclusion of ethnographic data, especially from Suzaku and Pata's experiences, is essential to this analysis since it highlights how socially and personally affected avatar creation is. The chapter places the act of creating an avatar into a larger socio-cultural framework by analysing avatars as the main medium through which players participate in this identity rebuilding process. This makes it possible to have a more sophisticated understanding of how users move through the virtual environment while utilising avatars as instruments to express

and play with various facets of their identities. Here, intersectionality is essential since it enables the chapter to examine how race, gender, and other identity markers overlap when creating avatars (Crenshaw 2013). Through this lens, the chapter examines how digital self-representation reflects and complicates real-world experiences of race and gender, shedding light on the ways in which players use avatars to either resist or reinforce societal norms.

By unpacking the avatar creation process, the chapter provides a foundation for understanding how players use these virtual tools to both resist and reinforce the identities imposed upon them offline. Using Hall's (2015) concept of identity as a continuous process and intersectionality, this chapter situates the virtual world as a space where identities can be re-imagined, contested, and reconstructed. Ultimately, it explores the ways in which MMORPGs and VR spaces become sites of identity negotiation, allowing for a deeper understanding of how virtual spaces reflect, subvert, or expand upon the complexities of real-world identity formation.

Avatars

Avatars serve as virtual representations for players participating in any MMORPG. Players create these characters to, firstly, gain access to online gaming virtual landscapes, secondly, to participate and interact with other avatars in these spaces and, lastly, to accomplish any expected objectives that are programmed within the story mode of any game. Story mode refers to a structured form of gaming where avatars and characters play according to a set story that is dictated by the makers of any game. Dietrich (2013, 84) argues that avatars serve as both mirrors and canvases, reflecting existing social structures while also enabling individuals to reimagine and reconstruct their identities within virtual worlds. According to Yee (2007;2020) avatar creation is driven by a desire for self-expression, emotional investment, and social connection. The authors' argument is that gamers treat avatars as a means of self-representation, moulding their virtual selves to meet both personal and social expectations. Taylor (2006) explores the cultural relevance of avatars within online gaming communities, highlighting their role in facilitating self-expression and social interaction.

Avatars serve as extensions of players' identities, allowing them to explore different personas and engage in diverse social experiences within virtual worlds. All these scholars argue that people create avatars to represent themselves in the virtual gaming space or spaces that they themselves cannot reach. The scholars mentioned above are essential to the

conversation that this research aims to unfold as they all highlight the social effects of Avatar creation on the individuals that create the avatars and the influences that the players have on the avatar creation process. They illuminate the importance of self-representation within the presentations of avatars. While these scholars highlight the reciprocal relationship between human involvement and avatar formations, they often overlook players who deviate from conventional character creation norms, in the case of my research, these are people such as Pata who actively choose to create characters that do not resonate with their physical appearance whatsoever. Specifically, there is a lack of consideration for players who do not necessarily craft avatars to resemble their own characteristics and identities but instead opt for unrealistic appearances.

In *World of Warcraft*, this involves players who prefer to be ogres or elves. Additionally, these texts focus on the avatar creation processes from a Euro-American context they do not account for African experiences of avatar creation. Geyser and Tshabala (2011), who are both South African gamers and digital artists, write about the representation of Africa as the un-charted other in the game *Resident Evil 5*. While their work is essential and instrumental, there is still substantial knowledge needed on avatar creation processes and how they influence players to create their identities from an African perspective. An example of this is how South African gamers embody their avatars and experience racialisation within Euro-American centred games. While scholars like Mamotheti and Daramola (2022) do write about gaming culture and massive multiplayer online role-playing games in South Africa and the African context, their arguments are focused on the usefulness of these games in educational spaces or pedagogical practices. They write about how these games can be used to help leaners and students learn easier and more efficiently. The social impacts and experiences of MMORPGs or the creation of avatars inside these virtual worlds are relatively not well researched in the South African context. This is directly linked to the creation of avatars, since the concept of reconstruction of one's identity in the online gaming world clicks here. In the gaming world, avatars are the digital representation of ourselves, and to be free to build those is to be given the right to jettison the constraints imposed upon us by our physical selves.

From my interview with Pata, it was evident that gaming can provide an escape from the constraints associated with reality, allowing players to experiment with identities that differ from our own. Pata's preference for creating female characters exemplifies this. He expressed this in our interview:

> What matters is what you, as a player, see for yourself and what you are trying to do in the game. For example, when I play, I often create female characters. It is kind of a funny reason, but I think If I am going to spend two hours building my character, I might as well make her my dream girl. So, I build my character accordingly. I do not build female characters because I feel like a female; rather, I do it for the fun of it, imagining how creating a female would look and feel like, as opposed to me creating something I am already familiar with.

Pata's quote provides a strong insight into how players personalise their experience in MMORPGs and virtual worlds by actively participating in re-making identity through their choice of avatar. His deliberate act of creating female avatars as a straight male is more than an artistic preference. Rather than simply questioning his gender identity, Pata turns the traditional gender expectations on their head through a process that navigates multiple intersecting axes of identity and power. His artistic accomplishment is best comprehended not on its own but as being in an intersectional context that acknowledges how several axes of identity both impact social mobility and creative agency. Intersectionality, as originally theorised by Crenshaw (1991), is not just about deconstructing oppression but also about recognising in what ways positions of privilege (such as Pata's gender and sexual orientation) afford some space for freedom of digital articulation that is not automatically available to everyone. For example, while Pata uses the visual aesthetic of female avatars to challenge aesthetic and imaginative possibility, his unmediated, male self serves as a privileged mobility. Crenshaw (2013, 1241) emphasises that the intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality produce distinct experiences in which an individual's access to social power can either constrain or expand their capacity for self-expression. In Pata's case, his ability to shift between gendered representations without incurring the kinds of social penalties typically imposed on marginalised groups illustrates this differential accessibility.

Furthermore, his case shows that the digital realm is not a neutral playground but a space where Merleau-Ponty's (2012) existential phenomenology of perception might apply, as players inhabit and reinhabit their digital bodies. Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology is indispensable for understanding how I and players like Pata truly inhabit our avatars in virtual worlds. Merleau-Ponty teaches me that the body is not an object I possess, but the very medium through which I perceive, engage, and exist (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 94). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he shows that perception arises from the body's intentional engagement with its environment (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 166); one could extend this to argue that in virtual spaces our avatars become that "lived body", grounding our digital experience. When Pata crafts a female character, he is not merely being playful, but is experimenting with

an alternative mode of being, exploring gender, aesthetic possibility, and desire beyond the confines of his physical self (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 137). This process mirrors how I observe Joburgers reshaping their identities amid the city's shifting social and spatial landscapes. In both realms, digital and urban, identity emerges through movement, interaction, and context. Merleau-Ponty's work gives me the conceptual tools to see avatars not as mere creative outputs, but as instruments of perception, exploration, and identity formation in our hybrid realities.

According to Malatsi (2023), avatars serve as texts that are layered with social inscriptions and psychic projections. This embodies his understanding of the 'surfaces and depths' concept, which holds that deeper currents of trauma, emotional memory, and desire are layered over visible markers of identity like race, gender, and class (Malatsi 2023, 38). The embodied flux of transgender and gender-diverse identities, which continuously negotiate their emergence through iterative avatar creation, is mirrored in this phenomenologically impossible reduction, the ever-incomplete gesture of self-fashioning (Malatsi 2023, 41). While virtuality has the potential to challenge cis-normative and racialised power structures, Malatsi places these practices within an intersectional framework, saying that it can also replicate them when players replicate real-world inequalities in their digital self-representations (Malatsi 2023, 44).

He further theorises avatar and character creation as a form of symbolic alchemy, whereby fragmented feelings of dysphoria or social exclusion are transformed into aesthetic expressions of agency and trans joy. Malatsi (2023, 39) refers to this transformative experience as digital euphoria, a form of therapeutic world-making that affirms identity through speculative play. These insights from Malatsi (2023) deepen the exploration of avatars as tools not only for aesthetic or fantastical play but also for therapeutic expression, sociocultural critique, and identity formation. In this light, avatar creation becomes more than just digital mimicry, it becomes a deliberate act of self-curation and resistance, particularly for those whose identities are marginalised in both physical and virtual worlds.

This multidimensional analysis echoes Crenshaw's (1991, 150) argument that identity is always situated at the nexus of various social forces. In this light, Pata's avatar choice is emblematic of how digital spaces enable the reenactment of identity in a way that is informed by both privilege and the potential for resistance, making digital self-representation a site for both personal expression and critical reflection on broader societal norms. Thus, the intersectionality framework enriches our understanding of virtual identity by urging us to consider not just the act of creative play but also the underlying structures of power that shape such acts. In our increasingly hybrid reality – where the digital and the physical coalesce – the nuanced interplay of identity and privilege becomes visible, calling for continued critical

engagement with these evolving forms of self-representation (Crenshaw 2013, 1247). By choosing to create female characters, Pata expresses a sense of freedom and creativity in constructing a virtual self that aligns with his own desires or fantasies. This decision-making process highlights how avatars become extensions of self-perception and, in some cases, reflect idealised versions of the self.

This act of avatar creation can be seen as a form of identity reconstruction. Pata's focus on building his 'dream girl' underscores how avatars can be imbued with personal meaning, shaping not only the in-game experience but also how the player navigates gender, fantasy, and desire. The virtual space becomes a canvas for reimagining oneself or engaging with different aspects of identity, such as gender. Furthermore, Pata's case emphasises the subjective nature of virtual worlds, where the meaning of one's character is tied to personal goals, fantasies, and engagement with the game. This echoes my exploration of how players use virtuality to reframe their self-perception, suggesting that the avatar is not merely a character but a tool for emotional and psychological expression. The analysis above feels especially relevant to my research on Johannesburg because it mirrors how people in the city navigate and reconstruct their identities in both physical and imagined spaces. Just like Pata uses virtual platforms to explore aspects of himself that go beyond traditional gender norms, I see Joburgers doing something similar in how they move through the city. They adapt, reshape, and express themselves in response to the city's complex layers of history, culture, and socio-economic pressures. Johannesburg itself often feels like a hybrid space, a part lived experience, part dream and part survival. The intersectionality framework helps me make sense of how people's access to mobility, self-expression, or even safety is shaped by overlapping factors like race, class, gender, and geography. Whether it is someone navigating Hillbrow on foot or shaping a digital persona online, these acts reflect deeper negotiations of identity. Thinking through avatar design and digital self-expression allows me to draw parallels with how some of my participants in Johannesburg construct meaning, assert agency, and defy narrow definitions of who they are supposed to be.

In the broader context of this chapter, this quote supports the argument that virtual spaces provide opportunities for players to explore identities and experiences that might be constrained or unavailable in the real world. It also touches on intersectionality, as choices in avatar creation – whether related to race, gender, or appearance – reflect deeper sociocultural influences, desires, and negotiations within the digital space. Ultimately, Pata's statement shows the emotional depth and personal investment that players can place in their avatars, illustrating how the virtual and the real are interconnected in ways that shape identity, self-

expression, and human connection. He does this either because he wants to see things from a different point of view or simply because he thinks that female avatars are aesthetically pleasing. Avatars provide players with opportunities for playful explorations of identity and personhood, both fantastic and grounded in the real-world socio-political.

Turkle's (2011) idea of the internet as a space where identity is fluid and multiple is central to my argument that virtual worlds allow individuals to reconstruct their self-perception. In virtual spaces like MMORPGs or VR platforms, players can adopt multiple avatars, experiencing their identities in flexible ways that differ from the rigid structures of the real world (Turkle 2011, 244). The ability to 'try on' different selves through avatars, as Turkle suggests, challenges traditional, fixed notions of identity, allowing for the creation and reconstruction of a self that is disconnected from real-world constraints. However, this freedom is not absolute. Turkle's notion of the "second self" is also critical here (Turkle 2011, 238). I argue that avatars offer opportunities for players to reconstruct their self-perception, and Turkle's exploration of how virtuality creates spaces for identity experimentation supports this idea. She observes that these virtual identities are not isolated from real-life experiences but rather connected to how people see themselves in both worlds. The immersive experience of virtuality allows players to project idealised or alternate versions of themselves, but this process is often influenced by the racial and gendered biases carried into these online spaces (Turkle 2011, 238).

Avatars as Cultural Reclamation: Suzaku and the Politics of Becoming

The creation of avatars also presents an avenue for creative expression. Through meticulous avatar design, gamers can communicate their sense of style and project a desired image. This can be particularly significant for individuals like Suzaku, who felt more comfortable expressing his Zulu side online than he did in the real world.

Suzaku wants to create African-themed educational video games focused on health science, particularly addressing diseases like tuberculosis and respiratory illnesses prevalent in African communities. These games will teach players about disease transmission, prevention, and treatment through either trivia-style quizzes or immersive narrative experiences similar to *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, but adapted to African health contexts. The games would incorporate culturally relevant elements like traditional music, settings, and locally developed medical knowledge to resonate with African audiences and promote

homegrown solutions over foreign medical advice. The initiative aims to merge entertainment with practical health education, using interactive gameplay to improve public health awareness. Suzaku's current focus is developing games that authentically reflect African identity while addressing critical health issues, serving as both educational tools and cultural representations. By combining engaging storytelling with accurate medical information, the project seeks to empower African communities with accessible, culturally appropriate health knowledge.

Suzaku grew in up KZN in a predominantly Black community. His parents, however, because of wanting him to have a better life and have access to high-end education, sent him to a mixed-race school, where the dominant languages taught there were English and Afrikaans. He says his mother sent him to private schools because she wanted him to speak and sound like more of a white person than a Black person; that way, when he had to have a conversation with white people, they would take him seriously because of his proximity to Whiteness. Because of this, he grew up playing sports most of his peers and his neighbourhood would associate with Whiteness, for example, rugby and hockey. To his Black friends, he was becoming more of a *mulungu* (which means white person). More than meaning a white person, *mulungu* in his case, Suzaku explained, meant that he was also close to wealth because of its proximity to white people and their culture. On the other hand, because of his body size which is tall and muscular and in addition to his skin colour, which was a smooth dark brown, his says his white friends were surprised that he did not play basketball or football (soccer). He said:

> In both being in the kasi with my Black friends and being in the schoolyard with my white friends, it never felt like I truly belonged in both contexts. With my friends at home, it felt like I was an outsider in a way because I was not Black enough to them and to my white friends, while I was white in terms of assimilating to their culture and my social teaching at school, I was still Black in their eyes and that came with its own fair share of wonders to them. My kasi friends would sometimes wonder when they hear me speaking proper Zulu because they were so used to me speaking English which is an irony because I grew up in the same area they grew up in. I do not understand why that would be surprising to them.

In the real world he would get criticised for being a "coconut' but in the virtual world, he gets to express himself freely, even customising the avatar to be expressive of the characteristics of himself that he would not express in reality. He said that:

> When I play online, I get to become someone else … well not someone else but I have the opportunity to express myself how I would like the world to understand me. I get to express my African Zulu side through my designs without anybody having to criticise how less of a Zulu person I am. Through my avatars, I explore the world ...well the

> gaming world in my own terms and I appreciate the freedom that comes with being able to craft myself in the reflection of my own self-image or in the way that I see myself. Part of the reasons why I chose game design instead of architecture was because of that. Because I had not tapped into my creative self since for too long in fear that it would be deemed a useless career because of how artistic it is. So even when I create avatars in games, it is not only for the game, but it also offers me a chance to be something I am not and yet still doing what I love.

In connecting's words to the chapter's broader discussion of identity, avatars, and virtual spaces, it becomes clear that his personal experiences of navigating multiple social identities parallel the complexities of avatar creation in MMORPGs. Suzaku's narrative reflects how, in both real and virtual worlds, individuals are constantly negotiating who they are and how they are perceived. His experience of being seen as not "Black enough" by his Black friends and "still Black" by his white peers echoes the fluidity and tension that players like Pata encounter when constructing their avatars. Suzaku's life, where he occupied a liminal space between racial and cultural identities, mirrors how players in virtual spaces navigate different forms of identity expression. Much like avatars in MMORPGs, Suzaku's identity was shaped by external expectations and personal desires, where his proximity to Whiteness was both an advantage and a source of alienation from the people of his hometown. This in-between condition resonates strongly with Homi Bhabha's (1994) conception of the "Third Space", a postcolonial hybrid arena where cultural meaning and identity are actively negotiated rather than fixed. In occupying both the "Black" and "White" worlds, Suzaku enacts exactly this hybrid agency, crafting new forms of self that exceed and transform the original binaries imposed by colonial histories. In the virtual world, avatars serve as a medium through which these identity negotiations can be explored without the constraints of real-world biases. Players, much like Suzaku, use avatars to redefine themselves in a way that transcends their immediate physical or social realities.

For instance, Pata's decision to construct female avatars as an expression of his fantasy reflects how the virtual space allows for a form of self-reconstruction that goes beyond societal expectations. Similarly, Suzaku's desire to express his African identity online – free from the social judgments of being labelled a "coconut" in the real world – parallels Pata's creation of avatars that do not resemble his physical self. Both individuals demonstrate how virtual worlds can provide an alternative space where one can freely experiment with identity, often as a response to the constraints imposed by real-world racial, cultural, or social norms. Suzaku's journey highlights the intersectionality present in both real and virtual identities. His experience of not fully belonging to either Black or White communities mirrors the way avatar creation

requires navigating intersecting choices of race, gender and social roles. In the same way that Suzaku could not fully belong to either group, avatars in MMORPGs often embody hybrid identities that challenge the neat categories of race and gender. This is particularly important when considering the African perspective on avatar creation, where African gamers like Suzaku might find themselves negotiating multiple layers of identity within a Euro-American-centred gaming world. The act of avatar creation thus becomes a way to explore identity in a fluid, non-binary manner, reflecting real-world struggles with belonging and perception.

Suzaku's account also resonates with the chapter's discussion on avatars as tools for self-expression and the malleability of identity. Avatars, much like Suzaku's adaptive social identity, are not static representations but dynamic, evolving forms of selfhood. In the same way that Suzaku navigated different social contexts, players in MMORPGs navigate virtual spaces to construct identities that can be shaped by personal aspirations, social pressures, and emotional experiences. This fluidity of identity in virtual worlds is a direct reflection of the complexities Suzaku experienced in his real life, where the tension between his Blackness and Whiteness was constantly in flux. Ultimately, Suzaku's story enriches this chapter's argument because it offers a vivid ethnographic example of how identity is reconstructed across both virtual and real spaces. His lived experience of negotiating race, culture, and belonging powerfully echoes Stuart Hall's (2015, 234) assertion that identity is not a fixed or essentialist category, but rather "a production" that is always in process and constituted through representation. Suzaku's navigation of being seen as "not Black enough" by some and "still Black" by others reveals how identity is constantly being negotiated through both social expectation and personal positioning. In Hall's view, identities emerge within and are shaped by discursive formations, frameworks that give meaning to who we are in particular moments and contexts. The virtual world offers such a discursive space, one where players like Suzaku and Pata can explore, rework, and even resist normative identity categories. Through avatar creation and digital storytelling, they engage in what Hall (2015, 395) might call a process of "becoming" rather than "being", actively constructing hybrid selves in response to the contradictions and pressures of their real-world social environments. This supports the idea that avatars are strong instruments that allow players to perform and recreate who they are in ways that might not be acceptable or readable in the real world, rather than merely being symbols of fantasy or escape.As such, identity in these digital realms becomes malleable, not a singular truth to be discovered, but a fluid expression negotiated between internal desires and external constraints.

When Pata dropped out of university due to lack of funds, gaming and the virtual world became his means of making a living, later blossoming into a qualified game and web designer through rigorous development in his art and his talents. It offered him an opportunity to reconstruct himself both in the virtual world through the various avatars that he created and the real world where he transcended from the label of dropout to self-made entrepreneur. Suzaku stated that his choice to enrol for digital art instead of Architecture was a defining point in him discovering who he was. Through the expressive elements and the freedom that animation and game design offered him, he was able to discover that his true love lies with Art instead of Architecture.

Reflecting on these observations from the field, it becomes clear that Pata's transformative journey is not merely a personal narrative but also an experiential testament to how virtual environments can recalibrate one's social identity and self-perception. Both these insights demonstrate that the interplay between economic hardship, creative liberation, and digital self-representation is deeply embedded in everyday practices. It invites us to consider how digital spaces provide not only an alternative realm for self-expression but also a mechanism for rearticulating and reclaiming one's identity in response to real-world challenges, like Pata dropping out of Wits.

Harrell and Harrell (2012, 75) argue that experiences in virtual worlds are real experiences that can have psychological impacts. They suggest that the ability to see oneself in different roles in virtual environments can influence real-world agency and identity. This argument is amplified by Pata's story as his agency and identity were both altered and amplified because of his engagement with virtual space. Harrell and Harrell (2012, 74) further state that some users view their digital representations (avatars or characters) as reflections of their real-world identities, while others see them as mere tools to accomplish virtual tasks. While this may be true, Pata's story serves as an interlink between these ideas because he did not just see his avatar to accomplish virtual tasks, but also as a means to communicate with other players concerning his aspirations, as he explained once during an interview that he met some of his business associates through online gaming. His avatar was the conduit through which he reconstructed his identity. By linking the intricate details of Pata's personal story to Harrell and Harrell's (2012) theoretical insights, we see a clear articulation of the dual role avatars play as both reflections and instruments of identity. This synthesis of fieldwork with theory underscores the argument I am making that virtual interactions are not superficial but rather, they are imbued with the potential to reshape real-world agency and identity. In analysing this intersection, it becomes apparent that the fluidity and multiplicity of digital self-representation allow individuals to navigate and transcend imposed social categories, thereby reaffirming the

power of creative expression in virtual realms. These experiences are real to the players that go through them and as such, they also support the argument that the second chapter made by implying that virtual experiences are just as real as real-life experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the relationship between identity and the digital realms offered by Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games and Virtual Reality platforms, with a focus on how individuals reconstruct and reimagine their self-perception. In a city like Johannesburg, where the intersections of identity are deeply linked to socio-economic realities, rapid urbanisation, and personal history, the immersive experience of these digital environments offers opportunities for players to explore new forms of self-expression. Avatars, as the primary medium through which players engage in identity reconstruction, reflect not only the players' desire for escapism but also their engagement with the complexities of their real-world identities. For someone like Pata, who was born and raised in Johannesburg, the process of crafting female avatars reflects a desire to experiment with new forms of beauty and creativity that challenge the monotony of his everyday experiences. His virtual choices allow him to explore gendered aesthetics in ways that are not necessarily available to him in his physical life. On the other hand, Suzaku's journey from KwaZulu-Natal to Johannesburg shapes his experience differently. For him, the virtual space allows the full expression of his African identity, a facet of himself that has been questioned or misunderstood by peers in both Black and white communities. By using avatars to embody and share his ethnic background, Suzaku navigates the tensions of belonging in a city like Johannesburg, where identity is often tied to performance, success, and social positioning.

The intersection of virtual identity reconstruction and the lived reality of Johannesburg is crucial. For Pata and Suzaku, digital platforms provide more than just a space to escape – they offer a mirror to confront and reimagine the parts of their identity influenced by their urban experiences. Johannesburg, with its fast-paced life, sharp socio-economic divides, and constant pressure for success, presents a context where identity is in constant negotiation. The virtual world provides a controlled environment where these individuals can experiment with different versions of themselves, testing boundaries that the city's real-life constraints may not allow. By having grounded this chapter in this reality, it became clear that the act of identity

reconstruction through avatars is not only a form of self-expression but also a way to process and navigate the complexities of urban life in the 21st century.

This chapter was aimed at answering the question: how do Johannesburg-based gamers use avatars within MMORPGs to negotiate and reconstruct their social identities? It examined how virtual environments, especially MMORPGs and avatar creation systems, influence and test our changing conceptions of who we are and what it means to be human. Players traverse and negotiate their internalised notions of race, gender, and belonging while creating their avatars, which is more than just a gaming mechanic. It is a fundamental exercise in identity formation. Such abilities of self-recreation have wide repercussions in a world rapidly digitising and one in which the dividing line between virtuality and reality is becoming increasingly blurred. It is through these sites that people can break through the constraints of social norms, test innovative ways of self-presentation, and confront phantasms of their identity-related anxieties. These virtual tools provide a secure space for people in complex urban ecologies like Johannesburg to engage with, contest, and renegotiate aspects of the self that may be constrained or policed in the physical world. The chapter therefore served to bring to the fore how fundamental it is to understand the role that digital ecosystems and technology play in underpinning identity fluidity and challenging preconceived notions about what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have sought to show the rich, entangled relationship between Johannesburg's urban realities and the virtual worlds of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), showing how avatars act as both mirrors and moulders of social identity. In the first chapter, I considered the ambivalent power of online anonymity, showing how disinhibition can foster community building while simultaneously enabling toxicity and exclusion. Drawing on John Suler's theory of the disinhibition effect and rich ethnographic vignettes from Johannesburg-based participants, I showed how anonymity's liberatory and harmful tendencies are interwoven. Skill and merit can trump offline hierarchies, yet the same cloak of invisibility can give rise to hate speech and reproduce spatialised distrust back home. Ultimately the chapter argued that online anonymity works differently in Johannesburg where knowing someone personally builds trust, so being invisible online can feel liberating but also unsettling.The second chapter revealed how the 'unreal' textures of digital environments are in fact deeply inflected by real-world infrastructures, histories and inequalities. Through the rooftop romance of Nhlax and the sonic textures of my interviews, I demonstrated that virtual spaces are neither neutral playgrounds nor mere reflections of everyday life, but extensions of our hybrid reality in which race, class and affective experience are negotiated in real time.

In the third chapter, I examined how individual gamers reconstruct identity through avatar creation. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991; 2013) intersectionality, I argued that avatars become sites of exploration, negotiation and subversion. Players such as Pata can embody alternate gendered or aesthetic selves and Suzaku can foreground an African identity more freely than offline contexts allow him to. This chapter showed how creative self-expression in virtual realms is enabled by unequal structures of privilege and access, yet also holds transformative potential for those whose voices are marginalised.

Three overarching arguments have emerged. First, virtual environments in MMORPGs constitute genuine social arenas shaped by and reshaping material urban infrastructures of connectivity, socioeconomic stratification and cultural production. Second, avatar-mediated identity work is inherently intersectional: digital self-fashioning both reflects and contests

offline hierarchies of race, gender and class. Third, anonymity in online spaces operates as a double-edged sword, creating conditions for new solidarities while also opening the door to amplified harm. By focusing on a city of stark inequalities, vibrant creativity and emergent digital economies in Johannesburg, this research has contributed a situated counter-narrative to predominantly transnational studies of gaming. Methodologically, my technographic and multisensory approach has shown how connectivity glitches, background soundscapes and platform affordances themselves become data, enriching digital anthropology's toolkit.

The Hybrid Identity Construction Framework I developed integrates urban materialities, virtual mechanisms and feedback loops, showing how skills, social networks and creative capital flow between digital and physical realms. At the macro level of Structural Context, the thesis showed across all three chapters how Johannesburg's uneven broadband grids, console and data economies, and the Wits Digital Arts department co-produce the very possibilities for virtual engagement and identity work. From rooftop *Fortnite* dates to anonymity-driven guild politics and avatar customisation, these material conditions thread each case study. The suite of Theoretical Lenses consisting of virtual realism (Chalmers 2017), cultural identity (Hall 2015), intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), disinhibition (Suler 2004), and digital anthropology (Boellstorff 2008; Hine 2020) has provided a multidimensional toolkit that makes sense of anonymity, virtuality, avatars and urban digital feedback loops as facets of one hybrid whole. Each lens was activated chapter by chapter, demonstrating their collective explanatory power. Crucially, the hybridity that emerges from the interplay of online and offline spaces in Johannesburg also intersects with forms of postcolonial hybridity in the city itself – what Bhabha (1994) describes as the ongoing negotiation of identity within uneven power structures. In this context, digital practices do not stand apart from colonial histories but are entangled with them, shaping how players navigate selfhood, recognition, and cultural belonging across both realms.

Finally, the Virtual Mechanisms and Feedback Loops domain unites processes from anonymity enabled reinvention to community rituals to avatar customisation. We see how in-game practices circulate back into Johannesburg's creative industries, academic circles, and everyday social relations, validating the reflexive cycle our framework proposes. This end-to-end mapping confirms that the Hybrid Identity Construction Framework is not merely descriptive but generative, guiding both analysis and the production of new cultural technological insights. This study faces certain limitations. My participant pool, drawn largely from Wits University's Digital Arts Department, cannot capture the full diversity of Johannesburg's gaming communities, particularly those with limited access to high-end

hardware. Future research might extend beyond university settings to mobile-first players or explore virtual engagement in peri-urban and informal settlement contexts. Longitudinal work could also trace how enduring virtual collaborations influence offline careers, civic participation or social mobility over time.

Practically speaking, my findings suggest that game developers and policymakers must attend to local infrastructural inequities and cultural specificities. Designing for inclusivity through diverse avatar options, robust moderation tools and community education can mitigate online harms and harness virtual spaces for social innovation. Educators in Johannesburg might draw on MMORPG teamwork models to foster collaborative learning, while cultural institutions could partner with local game designers to foreground African narratives in global digital markets. In closing, this thesis asserts that the boundary between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ is porous, dynamic and deeply consequential. Avatars are not ephemeral playthings but embodied texts through which individuals negotiate belonging, resistance and creativity. The virtual worlds of MMORPGs offer new frontiers for understanding identity formation, community building and the politics of representation – frontiers that are inseparable from the material contours of our cities. As digital technologies continue to reshape how we live, work and relate, an anthropology grounded in both urban infrastructures and virtual ethnography will be essential to capturing the full complexity of twenty-first-century social life.

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