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# Avatars as transitional objects: The impact of avatars and digital objects on adolescent gamers

## ABSTRACT

*With practically unlimited opportunities for having fun, the Internet and numerous applications rapidly became favourable means of popular media among members of the younger generation, who enthusiastically embraced the contributions of the new Digital Age. The purpose of the current article is to explore the nature of adolescent gamers' use of avatars as transitional objects, via employing object-relations theory to understand the psychological use of objects within a digital material culture. Incorporating the psychoanalytic research interview method, the current study builds on in-depth interviews with two adolescent males. By equipping their avatars with special skills, attributes and possessions, users were able to establish their virtual presence, and in turn address and compensate for certain difficulties, shortcomings and anxieties deriving from their offline existence and family conflicts. The avatars were viewed as objects of perfection and collectors of meaningful artefacts, and served as a source of status, recognition and accomplishment; frequently reaching beyond offline realities. Throughout the manuscript, we discuss relevant implications for the field of game studies.*

## KEYWORDS

MMORPG  
object-relations  
digital objects  
transitional space  
transitional objects  
online material culture  
virtual consumption

## INTRODUCTION

In his famous book *Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak (1984) presents the story of a boy named Max, who misbehaves one night while playing in his wolf costume. Consequently, his mother gets angry with him, and as a punishment sends him to bed early without supper. Locked in his room, Max escapes to an imaginary world inhabited by strange monsters called the Wild Things, where he soon becomes the king of these creatures. Taking part in various wild rumpuses, Max curiously finds himself accepted and tolerated by his followers. However, with the passing of time, he gets increasingly lonely and homesick and decides to travel back to his normal life. Upon his arrival at home, Max notices that his mother left his supper next to his bed. Echoing certain motives that appear in this book, numerous parallels can be drawn with cyberspace; an environment that enables individuals to assume a virtual presence that reflects upon their imagination, while equipping them with endless opportunities to experiment with new identities. Similarly, Max's discoveries on the island provide good examples that capture the immense potential characterizing cyberspace, highlighting its radical impact on the ways in which individuals socialize with each other, particularly in comparison to their traditional offline existence.

The Internet and its many applications present users with sources of information, entertainment, fun and socializing opportunities. Not surprisingly, these forms of media became popular among members of the younger generation, who enthusiastically embraced the contributions of the new Digital Age. Alongside the predominantly text based virtual environments of Multi-User Domains in the late 1990's (MUDs), online role playing games and virtual worlds emerged in the early 2000's, representing new frontiers in communication, socialization, and psycho-emotional development (Takeuchi 2011). Given their unique features and their massive user pool, virtual worlds sparked great interest among academics and practitioners alike, wishing to disentangle their potential impact on a variety of outcomes, including personality, identity and social relationships. These environments are particularly intriguing from the perspective of children, adolescents and young adults, considering their vast presence and their stage of identity development. The important role of virtual settings and corresponding experiences for the current young generation is further emphasized by current usage rates. According to a previous report, the user pool of online games reached 1.2 billion in 2013, with male users accounting for approximately 54 per cent of the total client base (Spil Games 2013).

Considering its uniqueness and immense popularity, it is not surprising that the phenomenon of virtual worlds attracted the attention of scholars from many scientific disciplines, including education (e.g. Gee 2003; Bogost 2007), sociology (e.g. Bainbridge 2010), psychology (e.g. Przybylski et al. 2012) and economics (e.g. Castronova 2005). By definition, virtual worlds are three-dimensional persistent spaces where users are capable of interacting synchronously with one another and with their environment using their virtual self-representations, also known as avatars (Spence 2008; Bell 2008). While virtual worlds focus predominantly on socializing and provide a great deal of flexibility in terms of activities, online game spaces, such as MMORPGs, apply stricter rules and focus more on quests, achievements and character development (Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Schroeder 2008). Nevertheless, game oriented virtual worlds also entail a strong social emphasis (Ducheneaut et al. 2007; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006), with their rich culture, unique customs, and

reliance on user-generated communities. These environments are characterized by creativity and flexibility, and even a tendency to redefine some of the pre-determined rules in order to create customized avatars, through which users may discover potentially unexplored aspects of their self (Taylor 2006; Bainbridge 2010). For the purposes of the current article, we conceptualize MMORPGs in the broader sense as virtual worlds, instead of merely referring to them as online game environments (e.g. Papagiannidis et al. 2008).

Revisiting our earlier account of Sendak's story, the imaginary world to which Max escapes can be paralleled with Winnicott's concept of transitional space and objects, and used as a framework for interpretation. The world itself can present a symbol of transitional space that incorporates the wild things as transitional objects. Through his immersion into this imaginary world and engagement in versatile interactions with the locals, Max is able to elaborate upon his anxiety and anger towards his mother, and to satisfy his narcissistic needs. Similarly to the imaginary setting depicted by Sendak, virtual worlds enable the gratification of different needs and motivations, including socialization and escapism. In fact, by lacking external and internal contextual elements, cyberspace can provide an environment where young users feel a sense of omnipotence; a phenomenon referring to the idealization of others as symbols of lost perfection (Freeman 2012). Additionally, in line with the work of postmodern scholars (e.g. Gergen 1991; Stone 1995), Zizek (2004) highlights the manifestation of multiplicity; the notion that the self can be fragmented and deconstructed, on the one hand provoking a perceptual shift away from the physical body, and on the other hand enabling individuals to experiment with different self-aspects. By providing countless opportunities for projection and for the actualization of unconscious fantasies – those that under traditional circumstances can provide the base for creative potential (Bonovitz 2010) – virtual worlds are able to foster the experimentation with new identities (Suler 2002; Gibbs 2007). These features are of particular importance in the case of adolescents and young adults, who compose the primary user base of virtual worlds (Statista 2014).

The period of adolescence, a developmental stage infused with intense emotions and radical changes to the self, is a particularly interesting time for exploring the meanings attributed to objects and their influence exerted over identity development. Although this question has been explored within offline settings (Erikson 1950; Côté 1996), particularly valuable insights may be gained from studying adolescents' relationships to objects in online environments. Based on his work with young MMORPG users, Lemma (2010) suggests that adolescents use virtual environments as a form of refuge 'where the body becomes solely an instrument for personal gratification, reassurance, and comfort, not the basis for connectedness with others' (2010: 711), and where adolescents are able to actualize their fantasies associated with their ideal self-aspects and ideal body image (Malberg 2011). Similarly, Castronova (2005) argues that online games can be considered a magic circle; a temporary yet perfect and orderly space that enables participants to experience unique events and extraordinary encounters. These special settings can be achieved through the act of play; a unique activity with the potential to elicit various positive emotions, as well as provide a temporary sphere that is part of the imaginative, has no limits, and brings along a distinct form of freedom (Huizinga 1949). In fact, players derive great pleasure from online games as these environments enable them to engage in a wide range of activities in a shared collective space generated and sustained by the user's creativity and imagination (Pearce 2009).

Evaluating adolescents' exposure to these online environments is a complex endeavour, with advantages as well as disadvantages. On the positive side, these online environments may benefit the process of self-development, enabling adolescents to interact with various transitional objects, engage in the act of play, and in turn experiment with different identities. Furthermore, by being able to actualize their fantasies and imagination, adolescents may cope with negative emotions derived from certain life events in a constructive fashion. Similarly, through their adaptive and constructive engagement in game play, users may be able to overcome social anxieties and compensate their low self-esteem (Yee 2006a); can become productive members of communities (Taylor 2006); and may in turn gain a better understanding of their selves (Bainbridge 2010). As Przybylski and his colleagues (2012) suggest: 'humans are drawn to video and computer games at least in part because such games provide players with access to ideal aspects of themselves' (2012: 75). On the negative side, more frequent virtual world usage has been shown to foster addiction (Achab et al. 2011), and has been correlated with increased loneliness (Ng and Wiemer-Hastings 2005) and lower self-esteem (Yee 2006a). Furthermore, despite the potentially favourable connotations mentioned above, it is important to note that in order for online games to induce positive emotions, games require a player's total immersion, as well as necessitate a certain level of game mastery, skillset and corresponding ability to navigate in an often chaotic digital environment (Gottschalk 1995).

In the current article, we present the case studies of two adolescent gamers to portray how objects and cherished virtual possessions can help users proceed through their journey towards adulthood within the popular MMORPG environment of *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). Recent estimates placed *WoW* as one of the world's most-frequented MMORPGs, accounting for nearly 5.6 million subscribers as of 2015 (Statista 2015), with 66 per cent of the total user pool between the ages of 16 and 25 (Statista 2014). Being one of the most popular online games amongst adolescents, *WoW* creatively combines role-playing with the consumption of commodities in a sophisticated virtual market setting. From the perspective of virtual goods, MMORPGs are special given their flexibility they bestow upon their users to produce digital content (Messinger et al. 2009), together with the special meaning carried by the corresponding virtual items (Guo and Barnes 2009). In turn, its unique material culture that boasts of a diverse array of virtual goods provides an innovative laboratory through which we are able to gain a better understanding of the role digital objects play in young people's lives. For the current article, we turn to object-relations theory to understand ways in which digital objects are used from a psychological perspective. More specifically, we delve into an extremely pertinent question: what can the usage of *WoW* and its associated rich material culture tell us about young users' self development? Building on our analytical interpretations, we discuss relevant implications for the purposes of game studies; within as well as outside the game industry.

## **OBJECT-RELATIONS THEORY: THE ROLE OF OBJECTS FOR SELF-DEVELOPMENT**

Object-relations theory considers the *object* as an essential concept that facilitates the establishment of relationships for the purposes of emotional nourishment, psychological development and need satisfaction (Gomez 1997). In contrast to earlier approaches originating from Freud (1966), who viewed

*objects* as mental representations of animate or inanimate entities used exclusively for satisfying individual based drives of biological basis, object-relations theory emphasizes the impact of interpersonal relationships, and underlines the mediating role of objects in the development and management of an individual's sense of self, social encounters and connections to the external environment (Chodorow 1999).

The overall evolution of humans' relations to objects captures an interesting and relatively complex process, starting with the period of infancy and early childhood (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983). Initially, objects incorporate entities external to the self, like a child's mother or favourite toy, and later move on to encompass items internal to the self, like the inner mental representation of certain objects. From a developmental perspective, objects vary in their relative salience, with certain objects, for instance the mother's breast, having a more significant effect for an infant, when compared to other less meaningful items (Klein 1930). Furthermore, while young children tend to have a sense of magical and omnipotent control over their possessions, with age and increasing maturity, the sense of control tends to shift towards the efficacy of manipulation. Turkle (2008) argues that throughout their journey across the incremental levels of maturity, objects provide children with unique opportunities to discover and defy reality as they experience it. Once they understand the meaning associated with objects and the possibilities offered by them, they become capable of incorporating certain object-related masteries to their selves, and thus are able to proceed to the next stage of maturity.

Building on his observations of children's interactions with inanimate objects, Winnicott (1953) combined object-relations theory with human developmental trajectories, and found evidence for the existence of a *transitional space*; a special third place that provides children with a bridge between their inner and outer realities. In these unique settings, children are able to actualize their fantasies through the manipulation of objects around them, and in turn can identify *transitional objects*. Transitional objects are special possessions that allow children to realize their own boundaries, by categorizing certain objects as *not me*; those objects that neither belong to the self nor to the environment, but instead are located in transitional space. Initially, transitional objects tend to include belongings associated with warmth and safety, like a blanket or a teddy bear, which can temporarily replace certain parental functions (Winnicott 1971). In subsequent encounters, the manipulation of transitional objects elicits a certain act of play that helps children integrate their outer reality with their inner one, and teaches them to separate fantasy from reality (Bonovitz 2010).

Although the foundations of object-relations theory derive from early childhood research, objects continue to play an important role throughout the lifespan, as they provide individuals with a base to experience the external world and reflect upon their emotionally charged fantasies (Rusbridger 2012). Fairbairn (1994) refers to the underlying processes by the term *transitional phenomena*, considering them as important contributors to self-development. By projecting their inner reality onto the external world through relevant objects, humans gain the ability to cope with their frustrations and inner conflicts, which in turn will impact the way they react to their external environment. Furthermore, the corresponding needs and expectations will characterize and guide individuals' relationships to others as well as to the material world. As individuals move through their lifespan, they begin to invest increasing amounts of energy to discover and later possess certain

objects, gradually attributing more importance to inanimate possessions. For instance, Woodward argues that ‘people seek objects in order to cultivate/satiate desires and needs, and that particular objects are sought out because they are invested with particular meanings that tap into these desires, needs, and fantasies’ (2007: 140). In this sense, the person-object relation can be characterized by a certain dialect of energy transference, with particular emphasis on human desire for objects within our culture (Woodward 2011). Object-relations theory places a lot of emphasis on the individual’s ego; the entity responsible for establishing relationships with specific objects, which – through incorporation and later introjection – can be integrated into one’s inner representations, and become essential elements of the crystallizing self (Fairbairn 1994).

## **EXPLORING ADOLESCENTS’ IDENTITIES AND RELATIONS TO OBJECTS**

Capturing a particularly turbulent period of life, adolescence can be regarded as a bridge that connects childhood with adulthood through the process of identity formation (Erikson 1968). Prior to adolescence, values and rules that need to be followed are seldom questioned. Puberty, on the other hand, tends to elicit a strong urge to reject former rules and initiate a search for independence (McCarthy 1995). Accentuating the tempestuous nature of this juncture, Anna Freud (1989) considers adolescence as a stage of mourning, as teenagers feel that they are losing many of their childhood privileges, while having to face increasing expectations and pressure to behave as mature human beings. In addition to mourning and the experience of loss, Briggs (2003) characterizes the period of adolescence using another theme; namely the fear of losing control. According to this view, adolescents do not only lose many of their childhood privileges, but also struggle to manage their vibrant emotional lives.

Along these lines, Blos (1979) emphasizes the importance of separation anxiety and the mourning over the loss of parents and beloved objects, while also having to integrate childhood traumas into their crystallizing selves (Blos 1962). In order to cope with these negative emotions, adolescents need to learn to tolerate and cope with high levels of anxiety and depression, while recognizing their conflicts and self-illusions (Laufer 1981). In order to successfully manage these turbulent times, young people need to start separating themselves from their parents, as well as begin to make their own decisions; many of which may present new and unknown social situations, abstract and undefined events, and a general sense of insecurity (Michalcáková et al. 2013). This process is particularly important, as identity can only be formed by successfully coordinating and integrating potential conflicts and traumas that in turn enable adolescents to achieve a greater level of autonomy and stability (Bion 1989).

In order to understand the role of objects during this turbulent period more fully, we need to also recognize the changing role of rules and norms in the lives of adolescents. In general, by rejecting rules, adolescents often feel that they are forced to let go of certain former aspects of their selves, along with many of the previously meaningful objects. Correspondingly, they feel the need to find new objects with which to connect. Throughout this process that entails a sequence of intense redefinition of relationships with identifying figures and artefacts, adolescents become capable of creating a unique sense of self that distinguishes them from others. According to Marcia

(1966), identity development begins with the object-self differentiation during infancy, and lasts until late adulthood, with particular relevance during the period of adolescence. Kristeva (2007) argues that adolescence is characterized by an intense idealization of objects and a strong belief in their existence, even when inaccessible. This concept of *ideal objects* captures another essential feature of adolescence, namely commitment, as adolescents seek commitment to beliefs, values, ideologies and individuals throughout their quest to define themselves.

Ideal objects can be regarded as specific transitional objects that heavily influence the process of identity development, providing experimental steps that progress towards adulthood. During adolescence, in contrast with early childhood, objects tend to shift to those that help young adults achieve an ideal self and allow them to experiment with different identity definitions. During the process of identity development, risk-taking is an essential component, and similarly to the concept of transitional objects, offers adolescents the opportunity to experiment with identities and to establish social connections with their peers (Woodward 2007). Adolescents are particularly fond of certain *talismans*, including relevant clothes or music, which represent special objects, symbolize status among peer groups, and enable young adults to further express their identities, while actualizing their fantasies and imagination (Lighthouse 1997). In addition to using significant objects as markers of self-definition, individuals are able to use objects to gain a better sense of who they are (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). For instance, during the period of adolescence, celebrities, actors, models (Giles and Maltby 2004; LaTour et al. 2010) and computer heroes (Boyle et al. 2011) have been shown to guide individual role model choices and subsequently impact identity formation patterns. In this sense, certain emotional aspects associated with objects may influence individual's identity and subjective well-being (Marion and Nairn 2011; Dittmar and Kapur 2011), and hence should be considered for the realm of object-relations theory. In fact, Giddings (2014) argues that 'the actual environments and objects of play, from the manhole cover in the playground to the articulate and articulated smart toy, have always suggested, triggered, shaped and sustained games and imaginative behaviour' (2014: 126).

## METHODS

In order to explore the meanings associated with adolescent game-play and the role of objects in these endeavours, we conducted in-depth interviews with two young active users of *WoW*. The interviews were handled in accordance with the psychoanalytic research interview method (Cartwright 2004) consisting of three stages: '(1) the search for core narratives while exploring the interview text in its entirety; (2) matching narratives with initial transference-countertransference impressions; and (3) tracking key identifications and object relations within dominant interview narratives' (Cartwright 2004: 211). Cartwright (2004) argues that psychoanalytic research interviews are efficient tools for interpreting unconscious fantasies and object relations within a particular topical area, using a small sample size and typically covering three to four sessions. As an innovative form of knowledge production, the psychoanalytic research interview is considered an appropriate methodology to identify as well as analyse unconscious processes, with particular attention to certain ways in which humans relate to reality and cope with their problems (Kvale 1999; Holmes 2013).

As a first step, we identified a small sample of adolescents who played *WoW* on a daily basis during a minimum of six months (see also Yee 2006b). Our participants were recruited from a High School located in Budapest, Hungary via employing a short survey eliciting information about their online role-playing game usage habits. Based on these results, we invited twelve players to take part in our research; two of them were willing to participate. After securing parental consent, we conducted brief interviews with the parents to gather general information about the child and their relationship (e.g. 'How would you describe your child's temperament during his early childhood years?', 'How did he behave when you said "no" to something that he wanted?'). Finally, we carried out the interviews with the adolescent gamers. Each participant was interviewed on four separate occasions, with questions covering three composite focal areas; their early childhood experiences (e.g. 'How would you describe your childhood?', 'What would you recall as the most memorable moments from your childhood?'), the role of game play in their lives (e.g. 'Do you remember what it felt like when you first started playing *WoW*?', 'How did your game playing habits changed over time?'), and their game playing style in *WoW* (e.g. 'What role do you prefer to play in *WoW*?', 'Do you play alone or in groups?'). During the final interview, we observed the participants during play, enquiring about their in-game experiences (e.g. 'How would your character feel about the things he did during the quest?', 'What kind of items did you keep after the quest? Why?'). Each session lasted for approximately one hour and was mediated by the same professional psychologist with a strong analytical background.

The transcribed interviews were analysed independently by two psychologists to identify the general themes and core narratives. Next, the two judges discussed their initial findings and engaged in a joint effort in order to explore the psychodynamics of the online and offline experience more fully. Later, they tracked the key aspects of the interviews that were linked with object-relations and completed the analysis. Finally, in order to ensure the validity of the findings, the person who interviewed the participants also supervised the work of the two judges, with their recommendations and observations incorporated into the final analysis. In line with ethical research standards, participants' offline as well as online names were modified to ensure anonymity. Based on their observations, the research assistants identified two separate narratives around our participants' relationship with their avatars, highlighting a difference in the perspectives held regarding the game by the two young users.

## RESULTS

### ***On the pursuit of consistency – Avatars as 'objects of perfection'***

Although Aaron (16) was born in Italy, his family moved to Hungary when he was only 7. At the time, his father was an Italian businessman and his mother was a Hungarian flight attendant. Aaron soon became accustomed to his parents' frequent travels and stays abroad, during which he was left in his grandparents' care. When the boy was 10, his mother decided to leave the airline industry, and his father opened a store in the capital city of Hungary. While Aaron's mother spoke a lot about the difficulties the family endured during these years, she also noted that by the time her son started high school, 'the deserved harmony was finally restored in the family'. The mother and the



father both consider having a fairly good relationship with Aaron, despite his occasional bad temper. According to the mother:

Aaron was a very shy and introverted child, but nowadays he seems to be more outgoing. He even has a girlfriend, who is very nice to him and whose family likes Aaron very much. The only problem is with his grades; he has serious problems with mathematics and chemistry, and my husband and I try to do everything we can to help him.

Aaron has many friends at school, but none considered very close. He started playing in *WoW* three years ago, when his best friend moved to the countryside, after which Aaron practically lost contact with him. He felt lonely, and soon after became a regular player, and established new friendships in this virtual world. His character is an undead warrior who belongs to the evil forces of the *WoW* universe. Through continuous development and modification, Aaron's avatar Banshee quickly became a prominent fellow in his guild, and is now considered a member 'other players can count on'. Although the fact that he plays several hours a day appears to cause some conflict with his girlfriend and with his allocating sufficient time to do his homework, Aaron greatly enjoys his virtual existence:

I have many friends in *WoW*, and I meet the Hungarian players regularly outside of the game as well. It is funny, because it was during the time that I first participated in a live meeting that I met Fanny [his girlfriend]. Basically, the community is great, I have close ties to the guild members [...] It is kind of a family, you know.

Compared to his younger years filled with rapid changes, Aaron considers *WoW* as a place of safety and consistency. As he is capable of meeting his online friends under offline conditions as well, this virtual world for him is a truly transitional space, where the line between fantasy and reality are easily blurred. Aaron's avatar can be considered a transitional object that represents a desired yet unrealized part of a safe and consistent life. In this sense, Banshee serves as an anchor tying Aaron to the home-like virtual place. His character represents an ideal figure for Aaron, perceived as a consistent part of his self, through which he can manage the supportive and social aspects of his life. It is important to note that this quasi integrity is likely to be illusionary, projecting Aaron's desire for a stable life upon his character that seems to be unaffected by the changes influencing his real self.

From a practical standpoint, through participating in a virtual community, Aaron is able to receive a great deal of social support that in turn enables him to create a socially desirable self. The underlying motivational basis of his avatar creation in this particular online game is underpinned by the fact that Aaron considers *WoW* as a specific safe transitional space where he is able to form secure relationships with other players. In this sense, the connection between Aaron's self and avatar reveals an interesting pattern. He says:

Although I know that 'me' and Banshee have several differences, I feel like my character is somehow similar to me. I spent lots of hours on perfecting Banshee and making him a unique character that can be easily distinguished from other avatars. I think I did a pretty good job...

By immersing into this virtual fantasy world, Aaron can experiment with his virtual self and in turn create an 'object of perfection'. Aaron's view regarding

his avatar reveals that characters may act as drivers for self-development, even if only in an artificial way. Without the usual restrictions presented under offline conditions, *WoW* enables Aaron to project his desires and fantasies onto his character, and develop new abilities and skills through his participation in the virtual community. For Aaron, who believes that 'being different' and 'being popular' among players are the focal points of *WoW*, character building is a predominantly social process, emphasizing the social desirability and aesthetic features of game-play. Similarly, taking advantage of the immense flexibility provided by virtual worlds to unleash one's fantasy and imagination, Aaron is free to identify the type, race, gender and other physical parameters of Banshee, further accentuating the social aspects.

Aaron has a generally positive view of *WoW*, as it seemingly helps him cope with the radical changes in his life. Interestingly, he did not associate game-play with potentially negative outcomes, such as spending less time with his girlfriend and other offline friends as well as pursuing his academic career. Instead, he seemed concerned with those social events he may have missed out on in *WoW* while being offline. While these results indicate that – in line with prior research – online game-playing might in fact increase levels of anxiety (Rau et al. 2006) the anxiety may not only derive from in-world experiences, as previously suggested (Lo et al. 2005), but may also originate from a sense of withdrawal that emerges from being outside or absent from the desired virtual space. These findings are important as they point to certain negative emotions that may provoke dependence and obsessive behaviours, and even addiction to game play.

From a player perspective, Aaron's avatar creation process reflects upon important aspects that characterize the links between his offline and online selves. First, in his pursuit of an ideal character, he is able to equip his avatar with material as well as immaterial features that in turn help him achieve status and recognition from his virtual peers. Second, through the achievements of his avatar, Aaron is able to compensate certain shortcomings that he faces in his offline existence. The avatar, the other players, and essentially the consumption of the game itself help Aaron overcome instabilities, social losses, anxieties and the lack of emotional consistency that characterized his life history. Third, the extensive care and attention devoted to perfecting the physical appearance of Aaron's virtual character reflects similar patterns to offline cultural trends, as many people in contemporary society view beauty and physical attractiveness as essential markers of success and accomplishment.

### ***The collector of magical artefacts – Avatars as 'virtual antiquarians'***

Tom (16) lives with his mother, father, sister and grandparents in a suburban region of Budapest. His family runs a small shop of antiquities, with traditions and close ties being particularly important for them. His mother describes Tom as a confident, smart teenager who is always a polite and sensitive family member, and who is later expected to carry on with the 'family business'. When asked about his future, Tom appears confused, unable to provide definite answers. Later on he adds that he wants to become an engineer. Apparently, Tom has not yet been able to find his own voice and express his own desires within the larger family unit, which might result in later confrontations between him and his parents. For Tom, *WoW* offers a wide range of

possibilities to cultivate his character. In contrast with the earlier case where the emphasis was predominantly on the avatar itself, Tom is more interested in virtual objects and possessions, such as swords and armours. Upon joining the game at age 11, Tom was fascinated by its diverse and sophisticated material culture and soon decided to build up a strong character equipped with unique, enchanted and powerful items in order to become a notable avatar in his guild. To obtain these artefacts, his character, a nimble elf hero named Tylfin Windwalk took part in numerous quests and battles, as well as acted as a merchant by engaging in various economic activities:

I know many players who enjoy battles and take part in many violent encounters. But for me, playing WoW means that I can do whatever I want. Of course, I also like fighting, but I am more interested in collecting and personalizing items to fit my avatar. By equipping him with powerful objects, I feel satisfaction and joy because this way I know that he becomes a more unique character.

Accentuating the material characteristics of the game, Tom's immersion in this transitional space enables him to experiment with his ideal virtual self-aspect, via obtaining and creating virtual goods that are particularly relevant for his sense of who he would like to be. By escaping to a fantasy world and equipping his character with virtual objects, Tom is able to address his inner conflicts through his fantasies, and ultimately avoid the emergence of conflicts with his parents, who seem to hold definite expectations regarding his future career trajectory. His avatar becomes an extended self; an object that can be accessed and experienced in a virtual world. Furthermore, the sophisticated *WoW* market enables Tom to measure the value of his possessions in an objective fashion. Based on his own description, Tom attributes a great deal of significance to a magic bow; as with this bow, he is capable of being distant from wars yet still participate in them. In a way, through impersonating his virtual character, Tom may be able to face his conflicts with his parents in a transitional space that provides him with safety and security.

Tom's case illustrates that avatars may not only serve as 'objects of perfection' but also as 'virtual antiquarians'. He treats his avatar as a collector with cutting edge taste for the most valuable and unique digital possessions. Interestingly, echoing the offline family business that he is expected to continue, Tom seems to view this virtual world as a store of nearly infinite virtual antiquities in which hidden treasures are found only by the most talented. Unbeknownst to him, Tom appears to actualize the career expectations of his family via experimenting within the safe economic environment of *WoW*. In this sense, he consumes virtual items in order to experience what it means to be a 'buyer' or a 'successful businessman', within an exciting as well as secure online fantasy setting. Consequently, the functional value attributed to virtual items helps Tom advance and acquire certain desirable skills and attributes that grant him with prestige, power and recognition via the act of consumption:

Items or certain combination of items may make the real difference in games such as *WoW*. You need to collect objects that fit your character, and that help you become more powerful. So you really need to have a good eye to pick up those things that are most relevant...

MMORPGs and other online games have developed a sophisticated material culture, representing an easily decipherable and logical system that ranks users in relation to others. Beyond the levels one may achieve by accumulating experience points, certain artefacts, such as armours, weapons and accessories play an important role in establishing a socially or physically prominent character. Tom, in this sense, consumes virtual objects in order to achieve those functional and symbolic values that help him experiment with his future 'expected' self, and in turn not only embodies his parents' expectations but also gratifies his hunger for success and achievement. In Tom's case, the most differentiating feature of his avatar comes from being the 'holder' of virtual items, as opposed to being a predominantly social entity.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current article was to explore the nature of adolescent gamers' use of avatars as transitional objects, via employing object-relations theory to understand the psychological use of objects within a digital material culture. Building on our review of object-relations theory illustrating the role of objects for individuals' development throughout the lifespan (Winnicott 1953), we established a link between virtual worlds and human developmental trajectories, with particular attention to the importance of objects within online settings. Furthermore, we positioned virtual environments as transitional space, where individuals are able to actualize their desires and imaginations, taking advantage of a variety of objects that are relevant for their sense of self.

Throughout the journey of young adults towards achieving their identity and self-definition, object-relations theory may offer a particularly meaningful lens through which to decipher the person-object link. Our interviews revealed interesting patterns regarding the avatar-self relationship, such that avatars can be considered specific objects with an ability to reflect upon individuals' personality traits and psychodynamic characteristics. Avatars are truly social agents that help users immerse into virtual environments, allowing them to explore the game settings more fully through their intimate relationships with their virtual self-representations (Banks and Bowman 2016). Furthermore, in line with prior work, the appearance of avatars appeared to affect users' thoughts and attitudes (Peña et al. 2009), indicating that the cultivations of their virtual selves and the activities in which they engage provide meaningful insights into different aspects of their preferences (Bélisle and Bodur 2010). In his recent work, applying his extended-self model to online environments, Belk argues that 'in the digital world, the self is now extended into avatars, broadly constructed, with which we identify strongly and which can affect our offline behavior and sense of self' (2013: 14). The two cases embraced different needs and motivations, yet consistently revealed elements that were important, desired, but also lacking in the adolescents' offline existence. The focal object of pursuit may have been a quest for a stable, consistent and nurturing environment, or an alternative future prospect incorporating artefacts of choice rather than obligation. Nonetheless, the underlying theme was the same; to fulfil certain unconscious aspirations made available in a transitional space through the manipulation of objects.

These cases illustrate that virtual worlds are infused with special meaning, facilitated by their ability to provide a transitional space for their users that in turn gets shaped by their fantasy and imagination. According to Molesworth

and Denegri-Knott, ‘individuals who become familiar with digital spaces as potential theaters for aesthetic performance may develop their imaginations along these lines’ (2007: 15). In the case of Aaron, the primary source of need satisfaction came from the manipulation of his avatar, whereas in Tom’s story it rested in the accumulation of virtual possessions. Online games, such as *WoW*, offer unique self-related experiences for players, enabling them to extend their offline existence through objects.

Finally, within the presented framework, virtual environments – as a form of transitional space – provide a great medium to study the role and importance of individuals’ attachment to characters and inanimate possessions, capturing a window of users’ projections and preferences regarding their idealized selves and aspirations. Objects, in physical as well as digital form, are considered unique entities that reflect upon the fantasies and imaginations of individuals. As Harman posits:

simply by dreaming up any random monster, we have not automatically generated a real object, but we have generated real qualities. [...] Because even though no unicorn or dragon is automatically real just because it is in my mind and affects my moods, it does automatically have real qualities.

(2011: 9)

Along these lines, our results suggest that through projecting their unconscious fantasies onto different digital entities, like the avatars and virtual possessions, players are able to interact with virtual worlds in a meaningful and intimate fashion. Consequently, they may be able to introject the attributes of their avatars or the symbolic value of their virtual possessions onto their identities, thereby being able to extend their offline selves. From this perspective, avatars and digital products can be viewed as liminal entities, bridging the fantasy world with reality (Molesworth and Denegri-Knott 2007).

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our findings are based on the interviews with relatively small number of players and the sampling method was based on convenience. Furthermore, having relied on qualitative forms of enquiry, our results cannot be generalized. Additional research is needed to expand on the avatar-self relationship from an object-relations theory perspective, by elaborating on the psychological meanings derived from avatars and virtual possessions via employing validated surveys or experimental design. Future research should target a larger and a more diverse group of users incorporating male as well as female players.

Regarding potential research directions, future studies could explore users’ in-game and post-game experiences by building on the theory of Game Transfer Phenomena (GTP); a relatively new concept referring to a wide range of non-volitional experiences (e.g. thoughts, images, sounds) that gamers encounter while not playing (de Gortari and Griffiths 2014, 2015). Conceptualizing online role-playing games as transitional spaces, this line of work could investigate the effects of avatar (object)-self relationship on post game activities and emotional states. By incorporating object-relations theory, these studies could enable researchers to understand how and why players transfer certain emotions and activities from one environment to another.

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