

**Depth and Digital in Conversation:
Practicing Marriage and Family Therapy Directly With Video Game Avatars**

by
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I certify that I have read this paper and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a product for the degree of Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology.

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Abstract

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Some psychotherapy clients have created video game avatars whose lives in virtual worlds include imaginal material and therefore invite depth psychological consideration. Using hermeneutic, alchemical hermeneutic, and artistic-creative methodologies, this thesis expands the conception of the therapeutic container to include these worlds and characters. The research explores how depth psychology can help Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists integrate their clients' virtual lives into therapy. A literature review examines the ways computer simulations are different from other activities and describes a postmodern realm where identity is an experiment in a multiplicity of simulations that are both rich and ideological. A multicultural approach is taken in order to treat clients' avatars and their worlds with dignity and involves an attempt to understand the cultures of technology, digital systems, and video worlds. The author proposes both an overall attitude toward and specific interventions for incorporating the virtual realm into psychotherapy.

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Dedication

To my sister Nancy.

Table of Contents

| | | |
|-------------|--|----|
| Chapter I | Introduction..... | 1 |
| | Definition of Terms..... | 2 |
| | Area of Interest | 3 |
| | Guiding Purpose..... | 4 |
| | Rationale | 5 |
| | Methodology..... | 6 |
| | Research Problem | 6 |
| | Research Question | 6 |
| | Methodological Approach | 6 |
| | Countertransference Issues | 6 |
| | Limitations of the Research | 8 |
| | Ethical Concerns | 8 |
| | Overview of the Thesis | 9 |
| | | |
| Chapter II | Literature Review..... | 11 |
| | The Fundamental Difference Between Digital Spaces and the Physical Realm ... | 11 |
| | Virtual Worlds' Organization Around Roles | 12 |
| | The Relationship of Roles and Identity | 12 |
| | Identity in the Postmodern World..... | 13 |
| | Virtual Worlds as Simulated Play Spaces..... | 14 |
| | The Psychological Reality of the Virtual World..... | 16 |
| | Disparagement of the Virtual World..... | 18 |
| | The ADDRESSING Model..... | 18 |
| | | |
| Chapter III | Findings and Clinical Applications..... | 20 |
| | Granting a Psychology to Computers | 20 |
| | The ADDRESSING Framework..... | 21 |
| | The Culture of Technology | 22 |
| | The Digital Culture | 22 |
| | The Culture of Virtual Worlds | 24 |
| | The Virtual World as a Mythological World..... | 25 |
| | The Culture of the Specific Game | 27 |
| | Archetypes, Personalities, and Energies of the Virtual World | 27 |
| | Video Game as Image Processor | 29 |
| | Conducting Therapy With a Virtual Character..... | 29 |
| | Getting to Know the Avatar | 31 |

| | |
|---|----|
| The Client’s Motivation to Enter the Virtual World..... | 31 |
| Chapter IV Summary and Conclusions | 33 |
| Summary | 33 |
| Conclusions..... | 33 |
| Clinical Implications..... | 33 |
| Implications for the Future of Psychotherapy..... | 39 |
| A Proposed Myth About Digital Psychology | 41 |
| Suggestions for Further Research | 43 |
| References..... | 44 |

Chapter I Introduction

Internet experiences help us to develop models of psychological well-being that are in a meaningful sense postmodern: they admit multiplicity and flexibility. They acknowledge the constructed nature of reality, self, and other.

Turkle, 1995, p. 263

This thesis is an offering to the imagination. Its content engages the psychological material in the virtual realm and speaks to any therapist who has clients with an online video game avatar they inhabit. Depth psychology is used as a lens to explore the practice of marriage and family therapy in the virtual realm. This inquiry is based on the imaginative premise that psychological activity is migrating to a digital world, which is fundamentally different from the familiar analog world and has its own valid psychology that is essentially as rich and alive as that in this familiar world.

Depth psychology provides an appropriate context for this undertaking, as it is an imaginative psychology, and this thesis is about the imaginary material in virtual worlds. Depth psychology is good at seeing psychological life in unexpected places and this thesis sees psychological life in the virtual world. Depth psychology treats the unknown with curiosity and respect, and a digital psychology in a virtual character is an unknown toward which this thesis is an attempt to foster curiosity and respect in therapists.

Definition of Terms

By saying the virtual world is essentially as rich as the familiar world, I acknowledge it is a potential and not yet a reality for most people. This thesis culminates in imagining a future where that potential has been realized.

The two psychological realms are distinguished in this thesis using the adjectives and phrases *virtual*, *on-line*, *cyber*, *cyborg*, *virtual reality*, *synthetic world*, and *avatar* to refer to the digital realm and *physical*, *biological*, *tangible*, and *analog* to refer to the familiar world; *cyborg* is used when referring to the whole, the virtual and physical realms together. The term *virtual reality* has both a traditional and a modern meaning. Traditionally, it has meant any computer video game world, even that of a text-based adventure; however, it currently refers to a specific immersive technology with three-dimensional worlds. Although some sources referenced in this thesis use the term *virtual reality* in the traditional sense, its use in the text of this thesis refers to its modern meaning. The general terms used for online games are *multi-user dungeons* (MUDs) and *massively multiplayer online role-playing game* (MMORPG), *virtual worlds*, and *video games*.

This inquiry is based on the premise that the hardware and software objects that we associate with technology are three-dimensional interfaces with a multidimensional, technology-based, psychological realm containing its own soul and psychological activity. Because the video game is one of those objects, this research makes a similar distinction between the virtual world and humans' interface with the virtual world, which is the video game.

Area of Interest

In almost every field they enter, computers disrupt humans' imaginal processes. Before computers, no one could have imagined a word processor, and now it is hard to imagine typing on a manual typewriter. People browsing the Sears® catalog 50 years ago could not have imagined shopping at Amazon.com®.

One way the collective human imagination is currently being disrupted is by its movement online. More and more of our imagination is being cathected onto the digital platform instead of where it went in the past, which could have been anywhere in the familiar world—for instance, into nature, onto an animation cell, or down to the barbershop. This movement will disrupt humans' psychological processes, because the imagination is psychology's imaginal process. Psychological activity is the essence of therapy, and more and more of this activity will be happening in a world fundamentally different than this familiar one.

A lot of people are investing significant time and psychic energy in virtual characters. The Entertainment Software Association (2016) reported that “63% of U.S. households are home to at least one person who plays video games regularly (3 hours or more per week)” (p. 2), and 33% of those play MMORPGs (Statista, 2016 “About This Statistic,” para. 1). The U. S. Census Bureau estimated that there are about 120 million households in the United States (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012), which means that approximately 70 million households have at least one video game console. Given a conservative estimate of only one gamer per household, more than 20 million online gamers typically “spend 20-30 hours per week inside the fantasy, . . . [and] power users spend every available moment” (Castronova, 2008, p. 1). Social scientist Rob

Cover (2016), in his book, *Digital Identities: Creating and Communicating the Online Self*, wrote that even when we users of digital technology “are nowhere near a digital communication device (which is now extremely rare), we leave traces all over the Internet, social networking pages, blogs, twitter, and other sites that are actively contributing to elements of our identity” (p. ix).

Guiding Purpose

The movement into virtual worlds is already well underway, and many LMFTs are missing therapeutic opportunities with the “growing segment of the therapeutic population that is impacted by technology” (DiGiulio, 2015, p. 10). This study reviews selected literature from the substantial body of research showing both the positive aspects of video games and the benefits of having a therapist working with clients to realize them. The digital platform is an imagination magnet. As described by Sherry Turkle (1995), director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, “MUDs are highly evocative and provide much grist for the mill of a psychodynamic therapeutic process” (p. 208). Video games consist of images, and “image and metaphor are the basic currencies of emotional and linguistic experience” (Faranda, 2014, p. 74). Unfortunately, today, it is “doubt[ful] that many scholars of the mind are even aware that this psychologically powerful tool, the role-playing element in the MMORPG formula, has emerged” (Castronova, 2008, p. 109). The purpose of this research is to fill in that gap of awareness and present, from a depth psychological perspective, an imaginative framework for incorporating the virtual world into the practice of marriage and family therapy.

Rationale

The psychological profession, in general, has not followed the imagination into the virtual world and thus lacks access to a rich source of psychological material. Staying engaged with the imagination is essential for mental wellbeing, and many of what seem like the world's intractable problems can be attributed at least partially to an impoverished collective imagination. Polarization between factions of people, for instance, is due to an individual's inability to imagine someone else's perspective. We need to reinvigorate our imagination individually and collectively, and virtual worlds are a rich and relatively untapped source of raw material for doing that.

A lack of imagination may even be the reason the profession of psychology has not followed the imagination into the virtual world. As psychotherapists, we have not yet been able to imagine how to mine the material we would find there. The reason this thesis is primarily an imagination is because its purpose is to help therapists imagine what is at the other end of their clients' connections to the virtual world and welcome it into a reimagined therapeutic container. The ideas, descriptions, and musings in the rest of this thesis are meant to get more of us imagining.

This thesis frames virtual characters as psychological beings because "in practice, granting a psychology to computers has been taken to mean that objects in the category 'machine,' like objects in the categories 'people' and 'pets,' are fitting partners for dialogue and relationships" (Turkle, 1995, p. 83). Because relationships are the LMFT's core competence, focusing on the relationship between LMFTs and their clients' virtual worlds keeps the thesis firmly grounded in what the LMFT does best.

Methodology

Research problem. LMFTs are not integrating their clients' virtual lives into therapy. As a result, they are missing an opportunity to access the virtual world as a rich and exciting source of imaginative material. There is a need for a depth psychological attitude toward virtual games and characters that will help LMFTs be grounded and responsive when they encounter a client's virtual characters.

Research question. This research seeks to answer the following question: How can depth psychology help LMFTs integrate their clients' virtual lives into therapy? The research thus investigates how LMFTs can extend the therapeutic container to include the digital platform and imagine inhabiting virtual worlds with their clients.

Methodological approach. The methodology for this thesis is primarily hermeneutic as it puts concepts from depth psychology in conversation with virtual worlds and characters. In a broader sense, the methodology is also heuristic, because I have a long history with computers that informs the research and the presentation in Chapter III. The methodology is also alchemical hermeneutic because initially I felt "chosen by the research rather than the reverse" (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2016, p. 52). It is also artistic-creative because it has begun a myth designed to help therapists find a place and meaning in the virtual world and is based on a "thorough understanding of the theoretical contexts" (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2016, p. 53) of technology and virtual worlds.

Countertransference Issues

In writing this thesis for eventual publication, I had several countertransference issues. One of these was holding the tension between my desire to serve the collective

and the demands of my ego. Typically, I ricochet back and forth between these. I also had trouble with self-care and skepticism.

My lack of success in a career is a deep wound to my ego, which still hurts. My ego hungers for the recognition and vindication that I feel doing something important would provide, and issues about failure, humanity, and belief in self did surface in this thesis process; however, the alchemical hermeneutic process did its work, and I became willing to acknowledge these issues and identify my wound. Alchemical hermeneutics' recommendation to engage in "transference 'dialogues' . . . in which the soul of the work is invited into dialogue with the ego's intentions" (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2016, p. 52) helped me untangle some of these issues and become more conscious and less emotionally reactive.

I also needed to be aware of the tension between my own needs and desires and the earnestness and dedication for which this process asked. Part of the appeal of this topic is its magnitude, but I cannot move psychology into the virtual world all by myself. I had to balance the care I gave to the research with care I gave to myself.

Another tension of opposites that I held in this process was between the part of me that does believe psyche is asking something significant from me and my self-deprecating side that is cynical about my motivations. Psyche told me that what this thesis proposes is important. If virtual characters have distinct psychological activity, it will open psychotherapy to another psychological world as big as this familiar one. Simultaneously, my skeptical self was reminding me that I am not above making up a dramatic scenario and calling because that serves my ego's interest and provides the idealizing self-objects I seek. It is romantic to be a hero and a dramatic, larger-than-life

figure in service to psyche. To keep my self-doubt company, I also had a small self that asked if it was not self-aggrandizement to think that psyche would have chosen me. This little self mocked me for thinking I could be tapped for something this big and, even though it is consistent with the attitude of depth psychology, thinking of virtual characters as somehow alive felt weird, and my mind rebelled against it even while I was in the process. In the end, I decided that even if I am making all of this up, it is still pretty interesting. Having done the research, I am confident that this choice was the right one.

Limitations of the Research

The focus of this thesis is necessarily limited to the realm of the psychological imagination and at the expense of attention to both the embodied world and technology's physical infrastructure. The study focuses on a subset of the digital world: the space that can be inhabited by virtual worlds and characters. The argument of this thesis is pro-symptom, meaning finding value in the symptom (Hillman, 1996), which limits me to a generally positive outlook; for instance, where some may see the perils of Internet addiction, I see all the imaginative material in engagement with virtual worlds. In recommending integrating this realm into therapy, this thesis does not address all the stages of therapy but rather focuses on the early ones. The discussion does not, for instance, include termination of therapy.

Ethical Concerns

Seeing the positives in Internet addiction should not obscure the reality that there is also a very painful side of that addiction. As therapists, we need to be sensitive to its triggers and careful in our choice of clients with whom to take these journeys.

Psychology is being monetized by the forces of capitalism as consumer psychology, and the stakes are the control of our own inner processes. There will be new ethical boundaries and temptations to cross them. As psychotherapists, we are strangers in a strange land and need to go slowly and consciously so that we do not jump to conclusions or stumble into cloudy judgments. It is critical that we stay firmly grounded in a humanistic, relational perspective so we do not get lost.

Digital technology has done real damage to psychological constructs such as personal relationships. There is a cost to spending time with virtual characters. What is a healthy balance? What parts of existing psychological paradigms is it healthy to abandon, and which should we try to preserve? These issues will evoke our countertransference, and we need to pay close attention.

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter II explores the current literature regarding the psychological aspects of video game worlds. It begins by describing some of the ways in which the digital space is different from the traditional places we have been cathecting our imaginations. Next, roleplaying is explored as an organizing principle of the virtual world, and the relationship between roles and identity is examined. Then, the search for a postmodern identity is connected to the virtual world as a simulated play space. Finally, the evidence for considering virtual worlds as psychologically real is reviewed, and mainstream society's ambivalence toward immersion in them is discussed.

Using a depth psychological perspective, ideas presented in Chapter II are applied to the practice of marriage and family therapy in Chapter III. The chapter begins with psychologist Pamela Hays's (2008) ADDRESSING framework, a model that helps

therapists to recognize and understand cultural influences as a multidimensional combination of factors, and reimagines it to encompass the various cultures that comprise the virtual world. The archetypal energies that are represented in virtual worlds are then examined. Suggestions are made for an attitude that LMFTs can develop toward their clients' involvement with the virtual world and some ways in which to get started.

Chapter IV relates the findings of this research regarding independent psychological activity in the virtual world to the future of psychology. Humans' broader movement into the digital realm is discussed, and conclusions regarding the research are presented. Recommendations for future research are offered.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This review of literature explores the psychological structure of virtual worlds through the lens of two of the underlying software engines' primary properties: they are organized around roles, and they are simulations. The chapter begins by examining the phenomenon of roles and identity in the virtual world and psychological perspectives on the virtual world, simulation, and play. The discussion moves on to describe the ways in which the virtual world is a real psychological space in a way never encountered and explores peoples' reaction to it.

The Fundamental Difference Between Digital Spaces and the Physical Realm

Because virtual worlds are simulations and based on software, they are different from the traditional places where people have been cathecting their imagination, such as books, art works, films, television, games of make believe, cars, sand trays, and other people. Some basic differences are the immersive nature of virtual worlds' interfaces; their persistence; the quantity of and the way they use images; and their universal accessibility, thanks to the Internet. In addition, as software, they can host many different psychological environments, and as simulations, they allow for a rich variety of possibilities. Virtual worlds have a history and an unknown future. Characters interact and change themselves, others, and the world around them. These properties make the virtual world a much richer and more durable psychological environment than the human imagination has been used to. This expanded conception of world and self is prompting

people to ask questions such as “Are we living life on the screen or life in the screen?” (Turkle, 1995, p. 21), which have never before occurred to them. People have previously wondered whether bookworms were living their lives in books, but those were isolated individual cases and not a question asked of society as a whole.

Virtual Worlds’ Organization Around Roles

In MMORPGs, the *role* is the way players interact with the virtual world. Roles are also important in the physical world, but there, they are fluid multiplicities with infinite variations and fuzzy boundaries. A person in the familiar world is not organized around and living through a primary role to the extent that the virtual character is. In the physical world, it may not even be obvious what role someone has adopted at any given moment; this is much clearer in the video game. The video game is *about* performing a role. Physical life is about more than just performing one’s role.

Although the options for roles may initially feel liberating, there are not nearly as many roles in the virtual world as there are in the physical one, and the virtual world’s roles have fewer capabilities. Roles are frequently variations on “Killers, Achievers, Socializers, and Explorers” (Bean & Groth-Marnat, 2016, p. 28). It is possible to customize the role to a limited extent, because “some MMOs also provide options for hair color, clothing, facial markings, and professions” (Barnett & Coulson, 2010, p. 169).

The Relationship of Roles and Identity

The theory behind French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s (1970/2001) introduction of the term *interpellation* views roles as essential constructs in identity formation, because the experiences that process psychological activity are determined by the roles available to a person. Althusser posited that individuals do not have a concrete

identity of their own. The way one becomes a subject with an identity and ideas about oneself is through “material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject” (p. 114). In the case of virtual worlds, the material actions are what the virtual character does, the material practices are the actions the software allows a role to take, the material rituals are the roles, and the material ideological apparatus that determines one’s ideas of what it means to be in the virtual world is the video game. Forming an action so that it fits into a practice uses the logic of the role and is an experience of that role. Those experiences, not any inner core, are what constitute identity. Similarly, philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (2002) posited a general understanding of “identification as an enacted fantasy” (p. 173). When players in a video game perform one of the material practices assigned to their role, they create what Butler would call “the illusion of an interior and organizing . . . core” (p. 173), because there is “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (p. 173).

Identity in the Postmodern World

The idea that “identity is not a substance or thing, but a form” (Cover, 2016, p. xii) that people support and fill with their material actions and practices is consistent with “the postmodern attempt to portray the self as a realm of discourse rather than as a real thing or a permanent structure of the mind (Turkle, 1995, p. 178). Simulations are a place to have that discourse because, as Turkle (1995) stated, “in simulation, identity can be fluid and multiple” (p. 49). She pointed out that “indeed, the unfolding of all MUD action takes place in a resolutely postmodern context. There are parallel narratives in the

different rooms of a MUD, . . . [and] creating screen personae is thus an opportunity for self-expression” (p. 185). Clients can play with various identities, and the therapist can play with different therapeutic modalities.

Virtual Worlds as Simulated Play Spaces

“Play has always been an important aspect of our individual efforts to build identity,” said Turkle (1995, p. 184). She quoted developmental psychologist Erik Erikson when describing play as “a ‘toy situation’ that allows us to reveal and commit ourselves ‘in its unreality’” (p. 184). The virtual world Turkle described offers a rich situation for such psychological play.

Per literature on play, a play space needs to “suspend reality, thus providing a space for creative and imaginative activities to dominate (Loftus and Loftus 1993; Piaget 1962; Singer and Singer 1992)” (Dean & Laidler, 2014, p. 120). Video games, like movies, suspend reality and disbelief, and “as we engage with play and enter the world of embodied images, our known conceptualizations of self do likewise seem to fade from view” (Faranda, 2014, p. 75). In play, one does not make as much of a commitment, and “virtual space is well-suited to such relationships; its natural limitations keep things within bounds” (Turkle, 1995, p. 206).

Writing about the culture of online games, telecommunications specialist Edward Castronova (2008) described the space of face-to-face roleplaying games: “Each player around the table brings a well-developed alternate persona to all interactions with other players; it is, in essence, improvisational theater” (p. 107). In this way, “MUDs . . . become objects-to-think-with for thinking about postmodern selves,” said Turkle (1995, p. 185) as well as “to think through the question, What is real?” (p. 73), a question that

“may take many forms” (p. 73). Psychologists Janie Barnett and Mark Coulson (2010) noted that “players can develop insight by creating characters of different gender, age, and appearance from themselves” (Brack et al., 2013, p. 29). Insights such as these “can serve as eye openers into social behavior and provide a means of exploring social interest that is difficult to obtain in other domains” (Brack et al., 2013, p. 29).

People who are stuck psychologically can fantasize about themselves in virtual worlds, and “reshuffling the human narrative through image making can instill hope in a variety of therapeutic populations” (DiGiulio, 2015 p. 28). Virtual worlds may also provide the containing function of psychotherapy, whereby clients “discover maybe for the first time, a capacity for managing life and life’s difficulties without continued avoidance or suppression” (Casement, 1991, p. 112). With regard to roleplaying in virtual worlds, “some of the consequent emotions may serve important behavioral and cognitive functions, such as the creation of more novel and creative forms of problem solving” (Coulson, Barnett, Ferguson, & Gould, 2012, p. 182). Video games also may be a means of “promoting positive social interactions and new healthy behaviors in clients who have a stubborn destructive cycle of relations and activities” (Brack et al., 2013, p. 26).

By observing their activity in virtual worlds, it “becomes possible to map some of the ways in which real people come to like, and even love, virtual ones” (Coulson et al., 2012, p. 182). Barnett and Coulson (2010) proposed the “the social motivation inherent in these games warrants an examination of the reasons why people seek out online communities” (p. 177) as well as “why players choose various attributes for their character (e.g., gender and level of attractiveness) and the consequences these have on the player and others” (p. 167).

For people with a mental health or substance use condition, the video game can, for many of these reasons, support the recovery model, which has been described as a “journey of healing and transformation enabling a person . . . to live a meaningful life in a community of his or her choice while striving to achieve his or her full potential” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d., p. 1). Simulation, play, and therapy can enable the healing and transformation, while the variety of worlds within virtual reality allows the client to choose a community or communities of their choice.

The Psychological Reality of the Virtual World

The richness of the virtual world is changing the way computers are seen psychologically. According to Castronova (2008), “Early visionaries saw the inner world, the synthetic world, as a tool rather than a place in its own right” (p. 268). As computers became more powerful and people became more comfortable using them, virtual experiences became much richer. Now, “the interpretation of technology as an instrument, from the point of view of practical benefit, is obsolete and naïve” (Giegerich, 2007a, p. 182) and “psychological qualities that used to belong only to people . . . [are] accorded to machines as well” (Turkle, 1995, p. 85).

In “many ways MMOs mimic the real world” (Barnett & Coulson, 2010, p. 167). Virtual worlds allow the player to experience “emotional reactions to the[ir] companions, who are not just resources to use, but fleshed out characters who . . . may be genuinely liked, and even loved, by the real people with whom they interact” (Coulson et al., 2012, pp. 178-180). In their review of literature on MMOs, Barnett and Coulson (2010) found that “friends made while playing were considered just as important as were real-world

friends, in terms of sharing personal information and seeking social support” (p. 174).

Castronova (2008) observed that that some people are already “drawing much of their emotional and social support from the inner world, some believing that they actually live there, and others wishing that they could” (p. 268).

These virtual worlds are psychologically so rich that “gamers reject the premise that the game social experience is inferior to other means of manifesting social interest” (Brack et al., 2013, p. 29). To the contrary, “some percent of users in a recent survey claimed that their fantasy world was their ‘real’ place of residence; the Earth was just a place you go to get food and sleep” (Castronova, 2008, p. 2).

Because of the new social and psychological activity provided by video games, “we need to look at synthetic worlds as unique, new objects, not just extensions of pre-existing online activity” (Castronova, 2008, p. 295), just as children are eventually seen as unique, new individuals and not just extensions of preexisting parents. Regarding the familiar and virtual world, or *real world* and *synthetic world*, as Castronova (2008) referred to them, he insisted that “we have to conclude that both of these worlds are real. They both matter to people and have genuine emotional consequences” (p. 270).

If, as DiGiulio (2015) concluded, depth psychologist Carl G. Jung believed the image to be “that which psyche presupposes a living body in which to live” (p. 9), then psyche must be alive in the virtual worlds, which are dense with images. Because digital images are so different than familiar images, psyche will live in those images in different ways.

Disparagement of the Virtual World

A large segment of the intelligentsia does not share this broader view of virtual worlds as real, and as a result, “the now prevailing technological civilization is disparaged from a cultural-critical standpoint high above it and external to it” (Giegerich, 2007a, p. 157). Much of that disparagement is heaped on video games, even though many activities other than video games have the potential to support addictive and antisocial behavior. Most of these other pursuits, however, get a pass and may even be mythologized as America’s favorite pastime, like baseball. If there were not a disparagement agenda, that cultural-critical standpoint would insist that “if MMORPGs are held to such criteria, so should other leisure activities, such as football, basketball, and baseball” (Brack et al., 2013, p. 32).

This thesis is engaging that disparagement. If people are experiencing virtual worlds as “unique new objects” with “psychological qualities that used to belong only to people” (Castronova, 2008, p. 295), then perhaps we should be approaching those objects as psychologically alive. Much of the research, however, continues to assume that all psychological activity occurs in the physical person and the computer game is just a tool that facilitates that activity. The next chapter looks through that disparagement to the psychological life in virtual worlds and uses a modified form of the ADDRESSING framework (Hays, 2008) to invite it into therapy

The ADDRESSING Model

ADDRESSING is a mnemonic developed by Hays (2008) for use when engaging someone from a different culture. Each letter is a reminder of a factor to consider, such as age or disability. Together, these points are consistent with goals established by

professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Counseling Association, and the National Association of Social Workers for calling attention to “previously neglected cultural influences and related minority groups” (p. 4).

Chapter III

Findings and Clinical Applications

Do MUDs oblige us to find a new language that does not judge virtual experiences purely in terms of how far they facilitate or encumber “real” ones? Perhaps the virtual experiences are “real enough.”

Turkle, 1995, p. 249

Granting a Psychology to Computers

This chapter takes the “perhaps” in Turkle’s (1995) above statement as true and proceeds as if virtual experiences are indeed “real enough” (p. 249). The chapter explores how the therapeutic work of LMFTs would be impacted if they reimagined their client’s video game avatar from being solely a *tool* of the physical client to a psychological *other* that is not just a conduit for psychological activity in the familiar world but an active participant in, source of, destination for, and processor of its own independent psychological activity.

First, this chapter presents an imagined, expanded ADDRESSING (Hays, 2008) framework that embraces both the virtual world itself and our experience of it where it interfaces with the familiar world. Then it imagines the kinds of archetypal energies one can expect to engage in such a space, suggests a depth psychologically informed attitude to take toward that space, and describes some ways for LMFTs to get started with their current clients.

The ADDRESSING Framework

Virtual worlds have virtual cultures and influences, and the ADDRESSING framework highlights the importance of an awareness of them. To respect the “previously neglected cultural influences and related minority groups” (Hays, 2008, p. 4) of virtual worlds and characters, the ADDRESSING framework can be applied to promote both therapists’ and their clients’ awareness of influences at both the interface and in the virtual world itself.

The interface is too big to be adequately represented by just one letter on the ADDRESSING framework mnemonic. To be culturally sensitive to their digital behavior in the familiar world, a therapist will want to know how a client behaves and presents him- or herself at the interface. How long has the client been using computers? Is the client a *digital immigrant*, “a person born or brought up before the widespread use of digital technology” (“Digital immigrant,” 2017), or a *native* “born or brought up during the age of digital technology” (“Digital native,” 2017)? How old is the client’s character? At what stage of development are the client’s computer skills? Did the client develop a computer disability—for instance, carpal tunnel syndrome—later in life? Is the client religious and a worshipper of Macs, PCs, androids, or iPhones? What is the client’s game identity? In which game culture was the identity formed? Is the client low or high status in the computer world? Is the client in an admired class of computer users?

Therapists who are dealing with a clients’ relationship to the virtual world will also need a virtual ADDRESSING framework organized around the culture of the virtual world. The logic of technology will shape the values and ideology of the virtual world, just as the logic of biology causes us to be “controlled by vegetal values. . . . The life of

root and bud lies at the heart of our being. We are really very ancient plants” (Bachelard, 1970/1971a, p. 63). Toward this end, this chapter examines four layers of the ideology and culture in which a virtual character exists: the technology itself, the digital realm, video games in general, and the specific video game a client is playing. Although this discussion progresses through these layers as if they are distinct, they are entwined.

The Culture of Technology

The technological culture is a culture of action, because *technology* is “the use of scientific knowledge to solve practical problems, especially in industry and commerce” (“Technology,” 2014., def. 1); a culture of uniformity, because one clock pulse is the same as another; a culture of interchangeability, because we are a butt in a seat; a consumer and a pair of eyeballs; and a culture of miniaturization. Not only are the products miniaturizing, but the space we occupy in relation to them is also miniaturizing. We do not need as much space in the rest of the familiar world when we are living in the virtual world, whether our butts are in the seat at a theatre or in front of our computer. We do not need to use space in nature or at the shops in the mall when we have a screen to which we can synchronize and shop and travel around.

The Digital Culture

Digital culture is an imagistic culture. We now think in terms of images, because the computer and digital camera have changed the financial and psychological economics of “how we produce and configure our identities, and the norms, categories, and elements of culture with which we identify [so that they are now] more readily circulated to us through image than through written text” (Cover, 2016, p. xii). Digital culture is also a hypnotic culture. Images on television are so powerful that media synchronizes us to it. If

there is a television in the room, it hails us to watch. We do not watch animated digital images the way we do natural ones. We cannot take our eyes off them.

Digital culture constitutes a psychology of systems, procedures, and programming. We have started thinking of ourselves as biological software, because “as we contemplate reengineering the genome, we are also reengineering our view of ourselves as programmed beings” (Turkle, 1995, p. 25). We are learning to use three-dimensional printers to create bodily organs. Digital culture is also a culture of perpetual improvement and perfection, because it is so easy to change things. Digital culture is a culture of instant replay because nothing is forgotten, which also makes it a culture of surveillance.

Digital culture is a culture of mass connection. Cover (2016) explained,

The fact that digital communication is no longer that which we do at one moment or in one space or with one device that we then put aside to have a conversation with another person in a face-to-face context has an enormous impact on how we do our relationships, subjectivities, and produce ourselves. (p. ix)

The digital culture is a culture of synchronization because synchronization is essential for the kind of signal coordination necessary for instantaneous communication, mass connection, and the coordination of billions of calculations each second. Synchronized pulses are the digital world’s neurotransmitters, the way signals are transmitted. Digital culture may be more animus than anima, because the pulse’s binary, yes/no, nature brings discrimination and clear boundaries; for example, the boundaries between roles in the virtual world are more distinct than in the familiar world, where there is analog fuzziness and mixing. Because synchronizing involves being the cause of something, it is a form of control. The logic of digital is the logic of control.

The Culture of Virtual Worlds

The culture of virtual worlds is a performative culture. Our familiar psychology is about *being* ourselves. In virtual worlds, however, characters *perform* themselves. Because the culture of technology is one of doing, not being, virtual culture is not a culture of art museums and other cultural artifacts that require one to be present with them.

Virtual culture is a culture of complexes, as found in the many similarities between virtual worlds and their characters and a feeling-toned complex, which Carl G. Jung (1948/1969) described as

the image of a certain psychic situation which is strongly accentuated emotionally and is, moreover, incompatible with the habitual attitude of consciousness. This image has a powerful inner coherence, it has its own wholeness and, in addition, a relatively high degree of autonomy, so that it is subject to the control of the conscious mind to only a limited extent, and therefore behaves like an animated foreign body in the sphere of consciousness. (p. 96)

The virtual character and world are images of the client's and the developer's psychic situations, and many of the players experience strong emotions. The virtual world is incompatible with the familiar and habitual attitude of consciousness. Robust software and modern programming paradigms give the virtual world a powerful inner coherence and wholeness. Virtual characters have a great deal of autonomy when the player is in the flow, and the virtual world itself has a very high degree of autonomy, because the Internet that supports it was designed to be autonomous and self-repairing. It would be almost as difficult for the collective conscious to shut down the virtual worlds of *World of Warcraft* (Pardo, Kaplan, & Chilton, 2004) as it would be to take down the Internet itself, because "the Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it" (Gilmore, as cited in Elmer-DeWitt, 1993, para. 10).

The virtual culture may also be one that nourishes projections. Normally, projections do not take root when we project them; if we want them to stay where we projected them, we need to keep reinforcing the projection. The roles in the virtual worlds, however, present such rich psychological soil that there may be enough for the projection to take root instead of washing away.

The virtual world culture is a culture of self-objects, because the video game's roles are full of experiences that can be converted into mirroring, idealizing, adversarial, and efficacy self-objects, as described in self psychology theory (Wolf, 1988, p. 95). The virtual culture may also be more animus than anima, because the software gives the virtual character properties that fit psychoanalyst Emma Jung's (1934/1957) description of the animus as a "lightning change artist who can assume any form and makes extensive use of this ability" (p. 27).

Because of the anonymous nature of online video games, the virtual world is a mask, and because "the mask is a weapon of aggression" (Bachelard, 1970/1971b, p. 161), the culture of virtual worlds is a culture of aggression, as evidenced in the "sexism, ageism, homophobia, and covertly racist statements . . . found on many chat channels" (Brack et al., 2013, p. 29). A common criticism of video games is that they are extremely violent; however, a virtual culture of aggression could be performing an important psychological role; as Barnett and Coulson (2010) said, "Even the violent game can be therapeutic" (p. 175).

The Virtual World as a Mythological World

Many virtual worlds are mythological by design. Castronova (2008) reported that "synthetic worlds work very hard to craft a web of mystical lore in which to embed the

actions of everyone, and it seems to pay off well in terms of user emotion” (p. 275). Because the virtual world is a deliberately designed mythological space and a world of action, the heroic journey’s patterns are bound to manifest. Going online into a computer world is entering a psychological realm like the one mythologist Joseph Campbell (2008) described when depicting the mythological region of the hero’s journey as “a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, super human deeds, and impossible delight” (p. 48). Heroic journeys involve life-changing challenges and rewards, and there are consequences to refusing their call. The consequences of refusing to acknowledge the significance of the call of the virtual world has been an impoverishment of both our individual and collective imaginations and the proliferation of apparently intractable problems.

Many video games are an endless road of trials. Because of these constant challenges, “seriously problematic gamers have a wealth of experience in leadership, conflict management, and cooperation but may need mental health professionals to translate that capital into life outside the game” (Brack et al., 2013, p. 36). The ultimate boon of the roleplaying journey is identity. As therapists, “rather than merely pathologizing individual gamer behavior, we can ask what aspect of the game behavior can be successfully generalized into healthy, out-of-game situations” (Brack et al., 2013, p. 36). If one’s client is a hero in the game, the boon could be heroic energy for the client to bring back to his or her sense of identity in the familiar world.

Another way to look at the Internet addiction of clients is in relation to the stage of the *refusal of the return* in the heroic journey, because in this stage, “the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favor of the self-scattering of the wakened state”

(Campbell, 2008, p. 178). As Campbell (2008) said, “numerous indeed are the heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being” (p. 167). We can aspire, however, to the goal of such clients becoming the “Master of Two Worlds” (p. 196), in that their virtual and familiar psychologies are deepened by each other because of their ability, like that of the hero, to “pass back and forth across the world division, . . . not contaminating the principles of the one with those of the other, yet permitting the mind to know the one by virtue of the other” (p. 196).

The Culture of the Specific Game

Each video game has its own culture, which reflects and frequently exaggerates the cultures of its developer-gods into stereotyped characters. The violent angry male energy of some of the games, for instance, could be part of the same energy that manifested in the 2016 Presidential election. Another example is that “many MMOs provide only young, slim, and attractive character choices” (Barnett & Coulson, 2010, p. 170).

Archetypes, Personalities, and Energies of the Virtual World

The psychologically rich virtual world imagined in this thesis will eventually have virtual versions of all the psychological structures and dynamics of which we are aware in the physical space; however, the dynamics will be different, because the virtual ecosystem is more nourishing to certain archetypes and energies than to others. The heroes and gods are also virtual characters in the sense that they are imaginal and persistent. Athena, the goddess who emerges from her father’s head, does well in the digital realm, but Artemis is learning to code instead of running with the animals. Apollo does well with the big datasets of the global brands and sending targeted advertisements

from afar, but Ares is finding fewer chances to engage customers and competitors on the showroom floor. Demeter's homemade meals have been replaced by the prepackaged foods of industrialized agriculture, Hephaestus does well making beautiful weapons of war and robots, and Aphrodite's image has been falsified and desanctified.

There is a lot in the virtual world for Trickster, who could be wandering across the street absorbed in a cell phone. Referring to our plunge into the digital world, Trickster might ask, "What is the belief system that is holding . . . that behavior in place" (Koehn, 2016, lecture).

There might be less alienation and more anxiety in the virtual world because "the self is decentered and multiple, [thus] the concept of alienation breaks down [and] all that is left is an anxiety of identity" (Turkle, 1995, p. 49). A violent shooter game therefore might have more schizoid, annihilation, and attachment activity in its roles. Digital characters could tend to be histrionic because technology wants to do a perfect job of pleasing us.

Clients who are players might display a distinct type of frustration because they "commonly try to take things from the virtual to the real and usually are disappointed" (Turkle, 1995, p. 207). This is a great opportunity for therapy, because "when the feelings evoked in transferences on MUDs are reflected upon, MUD relationships can have a positive effect on self understanding" (p. 207). Although the virtual world is obviously different from the physical world, there are still some commonalities; for instance, in both worlds, "likable people look good, are friendly, and are useful, and all three contribute to an overall sense of attraction" (Coulsen et al., 2012, p. 177).

Video Game as Image Processor

The video game is a rich and multidimensional image processor that allows the user to create and engage images. With regard to employing patients' use of digital technology to produce their own narrative, depth-oriented therapist and former film producer Amanda DiGiulio (2015) wrote, "When the images have authenticity, coherence, and integrity, they can unleash vast amounts of creativity and maximum engagement" (p. 37). Psychologist Frank Faranda (2014), however, made the point that "it is not the mere existence of an 'image' that contributes to the therapeutic value, but rather it is our experiential involvement with an image that brings forth the increased therapeutic importance" (p. 74). The very purpose of most video games is to provide experiential involvement, and this factor is an opportunity for therapeutic work.

Conducting Therapy With a Virtual Character

If the virtual world has a psychology, psychotherapists must tend to it. We must reimagine a therapeutic container that includes the virtual world and virtual character at all stages of therapy and anticipate finding as much opportunity for therapy with a virtual client as with a physical one. The virtual character is no longer just a subject for therapy in the physical world but is now an active participant.

As therapists with a commitment to the values of multiculturalism, we know that we have an ethical obligation to learn about our client's culture if we are unfamiliar with it. It is not enough to ask them to educate us. We need to engage the virtual world directly, not just through our physical client's eyes, and go where the character is, which is in the game. The impulse to diminish the virtual world is deep and affects most of us. For the LMFT, navigating the Internet may pose psychological challenges related to

countertransference issues regarding their attitude toward the virtual world. It is important, however, to view the virtual world as a psychology and not a technology. When we consider it as a psychology, we can use what we already know about therapy to orient us. If we look at it as a technology, then we must rely on our technical skills to orient us.

A client's virtual character should be treated with gentle dignity and respect. If a client has retreated into the virtual world to express something he or she did not feel safe expressing in the physical world, the client's feelings may be very raw regarding that issue. It is an honor to be let in to a client's virtual space, which is probably kept private, because "among many gamers there is a deep suspicion of stigmatization by helping professionals, and these concerns are valid" (Brack et al., 2013, p. 31).

My recommendation to therapists working with clients involved in virtual worlds is to act as if the characters are psychic facts with emotional lives, identities, complexes, defenses, personality types, shadows, and disorders that are just as real imaginatively as physical identities are. Act as if they have psychologically meaningful conflicts, relationships, ambitions, disappointments, and insecurities.

Act as if you have all the traditional therapeutic options. Role playing, self-psychology, dream work (do virtual characters remember their dreams?), the recovery model, sand tray, trickster, the heroic journey, psychological education, and all other models and interventions are also possible in the virtual world, if you can obtain necessary artifacts such as virtual sand trays or coloring books. What you know about relationships is also true in the virtual world.

To discover if clients have a virtual life, you will need a cyber-friendly initial interview that asks about their computer usage. Try to discover if they play video games, and if so, ask a few more questions and then follow up later, after you finish this interview. If a client does spend a significant amount of time online, then when you assess for crises, you will want to assess for virtual ones such as cyberbullying, as both a victim and a perpetrator.

Getting to know the avatar. Although it is valuable to be informed by what you know about the client from your physical sessions, it is important not to be blinded by that knowledge, because the virtual character, or avatar, could be very different than the physical character. Attempt to become acquainted with the avatar by the same process as you would a physical client. Talk to the avatar about everything you would discuss with the physical person. Ask questions such as “Who are you? Do you have friends in the virtual world? What do you like about them? What problems do you have with your relationships?”

By entering the client’s virtual world by relating to the avatar, you get the added benefit of seeing the avatar in action. Ask the avatar to show you around. Be there with the avatar as he or she carries out actions. Listen to the avatar talk about what he or she is doing. What is the avatar’s experience of his or her world? What is it like to be the avatar? What is the avatar discovering about him- or herself? Ask questions about why the avatar does certain activities.

The client’s motivation to enter the virtual world. Although a virtual character does not have a biological birth event, it is a psychological child of the client and has a gestation and developmental cycle. Its psychological DNA was formed in the physical

client's motivations prior to when he or she started playing, and its strands contain "the internal and external factors . . . that drive players to log into the game" (Barnett & Coulson, 2010 p. 167). Nick Yee, (2006), who conducts research on self-representation and social interaction in virtual environments, found three primary player motivations: achievement, social, and immersive (p. 773). Exploring these motivations with the client could provide a wealth of content about the client's relationship to virtual reality but, more importantly, about his or her situation in the physical world that can inform therapeutic treatment.

Each time clients enter the virtual world, they bring both that original motivation and the immediate psychological situation that prompted them to come online now. The evolution of whatever psychological material the client initially projected into the virtual character will depend on how that material is processed. Players will continue playing and processing psychological material only if they get "psychologically satisfying experiences" (Przybylski, Rigby, & Ryan, 2010, p. 157), which can be the thrill of being in the moment of the flow or something deeper. With either the physical or virtual client, our work as therapists is to tip toward the deep.

Chapter IV

Summary and Conclusions

To be immersed in the holy sober water would mean through patient listening to learn from the cold and mute things of technology themselves a new language with its own rules and its own idioms, a language that is not our mother-tongue, but the foreign language of concrete walls, airplanes, moon rockets, television sets, computers, nuclear bombs, and also the language of advertising, statistics, and the economy governed by multinational concerns.

Giegerich, 2007a, p. 157

Summary

To understand how depth psychology can help LMFTs integrate their clients' virtual lives into therapy, this thesis investigated how LMFTs can extend the therapeutic container to include the digital platform and imagine inhabiting virtual worlds with their clients. The thesis presented a literature review that discussed the ways video games are different than other play spaces, the consequences of their being organized around roles, the postmodern nature of video game play, and the resulting reality. I used a multicultural approach to taking this information into therapeutic practice and began with cultural awareness of technology, digital systems, and virtual worlds. Then I described an attitude to take toward this practice as well as some specific approaches to take.

Conclusions

Clinical implications. The following statements are conclusions that can be drawn from the research presented in this thesis. They express some commonly held current perspectives on digital technology and its future that have clinical implications in terms of the psychological impact they may have on potential clients.

We live in a psychological world. Although the focus of this thesis was limited to the virtual characters of video games, this statement of the conclusions of the research broadens and deepens that focus in both space and time. The different kind of psychological activity connected to digital technology is beginning to occur in other places. We live in the most psychological time ever, but it is a new type of psychology: an externally configured digital psychology embedded in messages designed to penetrate us. This external psychology can neutralize our own psychology and replace it with manipulation and control. The control can be relatively benign or it can exploit us by turning us into passive consumers of a fake reality.

All online activity is relevant. This research established the psychological significance of play and related it to activity in virtual realms. Playing video games is not the only way psychological activity is demonstrated in online worlds: for instance, “everyday communication activities and social behaviors exhibited by female Facebook users fall within recognized definitions and theorizations of play” (Dean & Laidler, 2014, p. 114). Clients may also be characters on the business and employment site LinkedIn, the dating site Match.com, and other social networks, and those virtual characters also contain imaginative material. Imagination is the libido of the virtual world.

People will be spending more time in virtual worlds. Online sites with virtual characters are proliferating, because “the synthetic worlds now emerging from the computer game industry, these playgrounds of the imagination, are becoming an important host of ordinary human affairs” (Castronova, 2008, p. 2). Avatars are already used for virtual events, for example. Therapists and their clients will be immersing themselves more deeply into the virtual world because all people are becoming more

connected to the Internet, the hardware is getting smaller, and technologies like virtual reality are creating richer and richer psychological environments. This is the continuation of a trend that has led to technology in general becoming more *granular* in our lives, meaning integrated into the details of our lives.

Technology is becoming more granular. The movement toward a ubiquitous, granular presence of digital technology can be seen in the evolution of movies, which were originally projected in movie theatres. Then we developed a way to connect the home with a television signal, and the screen was shrunk to the size of a television. Whereas we used to consume television shows on fixed schedules in 30-minute chunks, we now watch video on our cell phones and can grab a more granular few minutes whenever we want. The computer itself started in large dedicated computer rooms at remote facilities serving discreet communities; then moved into businesses with the mini-computer; came to the desktop, then onto our laps, and into smartphones in our pockets; and now, the fitness trackers, watches, and glasses that we wear on our skin.

Psyche is just getting started with technology. Affording status to the category of digital technology as a “fitting partner for dialogue and relationship” (Turkle, 1995, p. 83) is just the beginning. Psyche is just getting started with the machine. Modern computer technology is less than one-hundred years old, and biology is around two-hundred thousand years old, so the psychology and sensuality of the virtual world has not had nearly as much time to evolve as has that of the physical world; however, as with many things related to computers, evolution occurs very rapidly. We have already reached the point where “our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to

ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code” (Turkle, 1995, p. 21).

We are becoming cyborg. Over two decades ago, Turkle (1995) observed, “The traditional distance between people and machines has become harder to maintain” (p. 21). Globally, organizations of all size and scope were already becoming cyborgs. The culture in whose complex we live now has computers throughout its entire body and would die without them. The human body is the next frontier. There have been medical devices in the body for a while, but nothing yet that is optional. Portending the future, however, “‘body hackers’—people who push the boundaries of implantable technology to improve the human body” (Peralta, 2016, para. 2), are already inserting LEDs and RFID chips into their bodies. “They believe technology has reached a point where it can improve the human body instead of just fixing what's broken” (Peralta, 2016, para. 13).

Psychologically, we are also beginning to feel the computer inside us; for instance, Turkle (1995) reported that one student she had interviewed “spoke of his technology self and his feeling self, another of her machine part and her animal part” (p. 129).

Digital psychology is an external psychology. We live within a psychological infrastructure created to support the design, production, packaging, and delivery of image-based messages. There is hardly a product, design, dating profile, resume, lyric, or advertisement that does not contain psychology. Modern messages, however, are “no more than fuel for the esthetic or emotional effect to be produced” (Giegerich, 2007c, p. 300), which is to probe, poke, nibble, and penetrate our ideologies and replace them with the psychology with which the messages are armed. Messages come in many forms, including increasingly targeted advertisements in our web browsers, product design,

electronic billboards, cell phones, Google searches, dating online, and countless other means of delivery. Technology is not, however, “simply the sum-total of the apparatuses and machines, but one way the world as a whole can be constituted” (Giegerich, 2007a, p. 181).

Digital psychology is being used to control us. If the observations Giegerich (2007c) made about television a decade ago are extrapolated to the entire, modern, image-based messaging infrastructure, it can be seen as

above all else a psychological machine, an apparatus for slowly but persistently working at the transformation of the very mode of our being-in-the-world, the transformation . . . even of the idea of Truth and Reality itself. . . . It works . . . on the prevailing logic. (p. 287)

This machine’s reach extends all the way to the deities. There is no more truth to Aphrodite, who is more marketing fake news, than the essence of love, beauty, pleasure and procreation.

This transformation also serves the need of “modern society (to) control the bodies and behaviors of large numbers of people . . . [because] force could never be sufficiently distributed. Discourse substitutes and is a more effective job” (Turkle, 1995, p. 247). The virtual world’s ideology of action provides substantial material for that discourse. Discourse does the job because it follows the logic of the digital world. If people are talking about a television show, for instance, they will talk in the logic of that show, and

the logic invested in . . . [such] objects reacts on the logical constitution of consciousness, unnoticeably effects or infects it, so that what at first was only an object or content of consciousness will in the end show up as the structure or logical form of consciousness itself. (Giegerich, 2007c, p. 289)

This seeming inevitability makes us a “destination for ideology” (Althusser, 1970/2001, p. 115).

Discourse, however, can individuate as well as control, which is why Turkle (1995) described the *self* as also a realm of discourse (p. 178). The more our discourse takes place in the logic of an external psychology, the more we conform to and are controlled by that logic. When the discourse takes place according to our own, internal logic, we are liberated.

Synchronize means “to cause to go on, move, operate, work, etc., at the same rate and exactly together” (“Synchronize,” n.d., def. 2). When we watch or discuss movies, television shows, ad campaigns, or sports leagues or attend mass events, we are synchronizing, because we are working through our culture “at the same rate and exactly together” as the event and rest of the audience.

The arc of synchronization is toward more. Interpellation can be seen as a synchronizing of the ideologies of the subject and the collective. In the case of technology, interpellation is the process by which technology’s logic of synchronization has been restructuring the human psyche to operate with a synchronized logic. History has been a march toward more precise synchronization of both the ideological and the technical. We learn to think together, while our machines learn to labor together.

Our ancestors were not nearly as synchronized as we are. The modern organization depends on synchronized schedules, meetings, systems, and procedures, whereas the hunter–gatherers’ and agriculturalists’ lives did not. Even the idea of an objective thing called *time* probably would have been difficult for a primitive to imagine. The first synchronizations would have been very crude. Sundials were an advancement,

and mechanical clocks took synchronization to a new level, making possible such innovations as meetings, ocean navigation, railroad schedules, and production lines. The industrial revolution itself was a huge leap in both our ability to turn time into an object and the precision of synchronization. Now we are so precisely synchronized that we can ask a billion people all over the world what time it is and get one answer.

Interpellation injects the applications ideology into personal ideology. In addition to synchronizing with cultural images, humans are also synchronizing with a new class of knowledge tools. Interpellation predicts the injection of the ideology of the computer applications into our ideology because we eventually think the way the things we think about think, or, applying Giegerich's (2007c) terms to computer applications, "the logic invested in those objects reacts on the logical constitution of [our] consciousness" (p. 289). We think about email the way we learned from using our email programs. Excel is a tool that requires us to think in a certain way to use it. QuickBooks is both a computer program and a way to think about accounting. Best practices are a way of thinking about things in general. We synchronize our behavior with technologies' interfaces through the instructions on how to use them so that we can "operate . . . exactly together" ("Synchronize," n.d., def. 2). If we are not acting together with our technological tools, they do not work.

Implications for the future of psychology. If, as I have been suggesting, the move to digital is not a sign of a dysfunctional world, but is the psyche's direction, then the psyche does not have a preference as to whether it inhabits a biological or a technological form. On the contrary, if our unconscious behavior is a window into the psyche, then our fascination with technology and our eagerness to trade relationships

with people for relationships with technological devices could be a window into a psyche that also prefers relating to technology over relating to people.

There is already an amazing amount of processing power for psyche to inhabit, and soon, the smart machine will have an amount of grey matter equivalent to that of the human species, and then it will start having a lot more. Whatever it is that processes psychological material will thus be operating much faster in the virtual world than the physical one. It will not be long before smart machines are psychologically just as significant in all ways as biological beings. Because of evolution, we know that we humans will not be the dominant species on earth forever. It may be hard for us to imagine the smart machine as our evolutionary successor but it was also probably hard for dinosaurs to imagine us.

The computer is learning psychology. It needs to know some psychology so it can configure the targeted ads that appear on our screens. Creating customized ads targeted to individuals will require knowing a tremendous amount of psychology. The more psychology the computer knows, the better job it will do. Eventually, computers will know more psychology than we humans do. Technology will know the news in detail, view it through many different lenses, and try to make sense of it. What will it be like when self-aware computers know psychology? Will they act knowledgeably or impulsively? Will they understand the power of personality and the drawbacks to acting monolithically as one centralized brain?

As the external digital psychology moves us toward a cyborg existence, it is also disrupting psychotherapy's imaginal processes. The future of psychology itself in all its manifestations is unknown and up for grabs. The stakes could not be higher. Psychology

could be returned to the people or recruited by forces of exploitation. As individuals, we are under a constant onslaught of psychologically sophisticated messages whose purpose is to infect us with the identity and ideology of consumerism and a role as a consumer. We are no longer primarily citizens, individuals, or family members. “The technical has become an end in itself in who service we are” (Giegerich, 2007a, p. 182) and “to exist for ourselves is not enough for us. We must exist for others, through others. We have abandoned the axis of natural phenomenology and set up a phenomenology of pretense, of make-believe” (Bachelard, 1970/1971b, p. 162).

A proposed myth about digital psychology. I began this thesis by saying that one reason depth psychology was appropriate is because of the attitude it takes toward the unknown. I struggle with wanting to know the unknowable future of psychology and what it will mean for the human values I hold dear. There are very big forces changing the nature of psychology and, as Carl G. Jung (1975) stated, “all steps forward in the improvement of the human psyche have been paid for by blood” (p. 549). We can see the bleak landscape and dark forces of exploitation.

This is where depth psychology offers an alternative. We depth psychotherapists can put our faith in the imagination of our profession. The imaginative material in the virtual world is fruit for the soul; however, like fruit that, instead of being eaten and digested, has fallen to the ground, it has rotted, causing the world’s imagination to be impoverished. This impoverishment of imagination will continue unless the therapists who know how to help clients digest psychological material listen to the call of the virtual world.

As human beings, we need a mythology of digital psychology to orient us in the virtual world. That myth may be what Campbell (1991) called “the only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future, one that is talking about the planet” (p. 41). Technology is a planet-wide topic and so are the interests that are using it to manipulate us. Because myths are from the cultures about which they speak, a myth that tells a narrative about the planet must be from the planet and not just one part of it. The only way for a myth to be from the planet is if it is being told all over the planet, and online games are one of the few ways for people from all over the planet to tell and evolve a story. A myth that is being told by the virtual world as it unfolds is also consistent with our larger move “from a modernist culture of calculation toward a post modernist culture of simulation” (Turkle, 1995, p. 20). As advocates for psychological health, we LMFTs need to take a leadership role in developing this mythology in our own practice and through our professional organizations.

Fortunately, we do not need any sort of deep knowledge to do this. We can actually stumble into it right away, because “postmodern theorists have suggested that the search for depth and mechanism is futile, and that it is more realistic to explore the world of shifting surfaces than to embark on a search for origins and structure” (Turkle, 1995, p. 36). All we need is our imagination. I hope my example of imagining this world has provided enough of “a sensate and potent image of interiority (to invite you) to dream the stream into your own creative consciousness” (Slattery, 2012, p. 122), because what is needed is for all of us to be dreaming this future. The ideas I am offering in this thesis could be completely wrong on a factual level, but if I provided readers with an image, then it will have been successful, because this thesis is about getting people to imagine

more. I have faith that if we all start imagining, with one client at a time, a mythology will emerge. I offer this thesis as a start.

Suggestions for further research. A next step for research on this topic would be an implementation study. This would require developing materials for the practice of using virtual worlds in psychotherapy, including techniques to use with clients and avatars. The clinicians would need training and ongoing support. The study could examine both what worked and did not work with the implementation of this practice as well as the differences and similarities between psychological traits of avatars and those of the clients. A longitudinal study could track how those differences and similarities changed over time.

This is not a lofty program for the illumination of the world, but a little light that is to be carried in the silence and unseeness of what we as individuals do, through the night of our present.

Giegerich, 2007b, p. 336

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