

Journal of • Virtual Worlds Research

jvwresearch.org ISSN: 1941-8477

The Metaverse Assembled

Volume 2, Number 5



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April 2010

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The Journal of Virtual Worlds Research
is owned and published by the
Virtual Worlds Institute, Inc.
Austin, Texas, USA



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The Essence of Virtuality: Exploring the Digital Body

By Mark Ortwein

Texas A&M University

Abstract

This “think piece” explores the definitional possibilities of “body”— that is, what is a body and how should we understand it, especially in light of the recent emergence of virtual bodies. To this end, the author employs an essentialist framework for understanding: Is the body reducible to some fundamental essence or substance, something common to all bodies? To what extent does a definition of body extend to virtual bodies? These questions (and others) are posited, and the author invites readers to consider the manifold issues engendered by such reflection.

Keywords: Virtual: *Having the power of acting or of invisible efficacy without the agency of the material or sensible part; potential; energizing.* Essence: *Philosophy. The inward nature, true substance, or constitution of anything, as opposed to what is accidental, phenomenal, illusory, etc. (Dictionary.com)*

The Essence of Virtuality: Exploring the Digital Body

By Mark Ortwein

Texas A&M University

What is a body and how should or should we not define it? This open question can be analyzed from numerous perspectives. We might take a hermeneutic approach and interpret its constituent parts, seeking meaning. Feminist scholars have made important contributions to this area. Alternatively, perhaps we might ask an epistemological question like, “How do I *know* I *have* a body?” Cartesian skeptics will enjoy this one. These are interesting modes of inquiry — not at all extensive of the numerous ways in which we can think about the body. For present purposes, however, I am more concerned with understanding *what* a body is/is not, and what this suggests about digital bodies — that is, those virtual bodies (sometimes called avatars) we construct in virtual environments and online games. Nevertheless, it is significant that we understand and appreciate precisely what we mean when we use the word *body*. We shall see that easy distinctions between body and a non-body are almost hopelessly ambiguous. Thus, the first section of this essay will enumerate these difficulties through an essentialist framework, which entails a brief description of essentialist theory. This should give us a good platform for deconstructing (literally) the body in Real Life and Second Life — which is described in Part Two.

Essentialist Theory in Two Minutes

Essentialist philosophers hold that most (if not all) objects are comprised of two properties: the essential and the accidental. Essential properties are those which a thing must possess to be what it is. A ball, for example, is necessarily round; without roundness it is no longer a ball but something else. It could, however, possess numerous accidental properties. It might be made of rubber or plastic, be any color imaginable, be large or small, and so forth. Thus, we understand accidental properties to be those which an object may possess but are not necessary to its existence (Robertson, 2008). Attempts to define essential properties have drawn from numerous philosophical traditions — most notably the metaphysics of Aristotle. On the other hand, Saul Kripke published a seminal article, “Identity and Necessity” in 1971, which drastically narrowed the common approach to essentialism (Oderberg, 2007). Here he outlined a form of modal logic, called K for short, that employed specific symbols (\rightarrow , \sim , \leftrightarrow , \Box) to signify precise linguistic truth statements. The fundamental object of this logic is to distinguish the difference between what is “possible” and what is “necessary” (Garson, 2008). Robertson offers this basic and symbol free example:

“*P* is an *essential property* of an object *o* just in case it is necessary that *o* has *P* whereas *P* is an *accidental property* of an object *o* just in case *o* has *P* but it is possible that *o* lacks *P*.” (2008, para. 5).

Using our earlier example:

Roundness is an essential property of a *ball* just in case it is “necessary” that a *ball* have *roundness*... whereas *roundness* is an accidental property of a *ball* just in case a *ball* has *roundness* but it is “possible” that a *ball* lacks *roundness*.

Is such a circuitous route to an otherwise obvious truth necessary? Consider for a moment what it means to be *human*... or more specifically, what it means to have a *human body*. Although essentialism appeals to our common sense (that all things have a basic essence that

A ball.



Not a ball, right?



makes them what they are) not all agree that it is a viable theory. For example, Karl Popper argued that essence is neither measurable nor definable. It has no actual physical presence thus any definition is at best an impression or, as he derisively put it, an “intellectual intuition” (Oderberg, 2007). Other objections concern the essentialist's use of grammar — chiefly, that language is simply too imprecise for the job. Words evolve, misrepresent, take on additional meanings, alter with circumstances, and subtly shift definitions according to the individual user. Even precise scientific language evolves. If a medieval philosopher assigned a categorical essence to the word “fish” it would share little in common with a designation given by a contemporary philosopher. Why? Because new understanding demands new definitions and classification, and there is no reason to believe we have exhausted our understanding about anything.

Deconstructing the Body

The physical body fairs no better under the essentialist's knife. Cut off my leg; I still have a body. Remove one leg and both arms; *probably* still have a body. Remove both arms and both legs; maybe I no longer have a body, or perhaps my body is no longer a traditional body but retains body-status nonetheless. Accidental conditions (legs, arms, and so forth) are not what define the essence of my body. Is it something else, some quality without which I no longer claim to have a body? Perhaps there is a metaphysical explanation — to claim the body is a warehouse of sorts — a casing for the soul, or perhaps just one-half of a Cartesian dualism. If this is true, then a body might be just anything that houses a soul/mind. Theists and religious folk in general might be drawn to this position. Others will be tempted by a completely naturalistic conception of body, placing it within the realm of causal transactions in nature, synaptic firings,

bodily secretions, all the pumping and churning of carnal existence. And still others might split the difference with some sort of hybrid notion. However we conceive of the body, the fact remains that we have one and it is difficult to define in certain terms.

Perhaps we can find common ground here by claiming a rational component is what constitutes a body. But what of corpses? Have they no bodies? Would we callously claim that only those parts which are organic deserve body-status? Certainly not! Once more we are confronted with a conundrum, and it would seem we still have very little to go on: Various parts of the body are not necessary, nor are (putatively) rationality or sentience, or even organic parts. There seems to be no standard, no actual rubric, for judging what a body is or what one needs to possess one. Bearing this in mind let us consider the digital body.

We have already seen that defining a Real Life body is beset with difficulties. It needs not be living or rational, have all its parts, or even be constructed of organic parts. What then do we make of our digital bodies in, say, Second Life? Is it possible that these bodies are just as *valid* as those we possess in Real Life? This is intuitively revolting but plausible in a sort of disconcertingly logical sense. A digital body is not alive — no problem there. It *is* rational insofar as a mind controls its actions and that is helpful. It wholly consists of synthetic, electronic parts. This is not a problem. It exists in time and space, a factor which bears consideration, to be sure. I see no easy answer to these questions, and the issues surrounding “body-status” are surprisingly manifold and rich.

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