

SEMI RYU

Kinetic Imaging, School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University

Information and Knowledge Society, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Barcelona

Avatar life-review: Virtual bodies in a dramatic paradox

ABSTRACT

This article will examine ongoing avatar life-review projects, in the light of drama therapy concepts and methods, exploring a hybrid model of avatar/drama therapy in a virtually mediated environment. The avatar life-review platform will incorporate techniques/methods of drama therapy and psychodrama such as role playing, role-reversal, doubling and mirroring as a hybrid therapeutic model between VR and theatre. It will address multiple states of self in dramatic paradox, especially for people with traumatic memories, disabilities, memory loss or mental health complications.

KEYWORDS

Avatar
mixed reality
drama therapy
life-review
storytelling
role
paradox

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I was standing on a London stage giving a virtual puppet performance, titled *Parting on Z*.¹ In it, I played the roles of two lovers, caught in an impossible love situation, bidding each other farewell. Facing the screen, I acted the part of the female lover dressed up in a Korean costume, while the male lover was an on-screen avatar with my voice. During this performance, something unexpected happened. My voice and body started shaking. I was not acting anymore, and started weeping. I felt embarrassed to cry in front of a

1. It was the virtual puppet performance, *Parting on Z*, Digital Resources for the Humanities and Arts 2010 (Sensual Technologies: Collaborative Practices of Interdisciplinarity), Antonin Artaud Space, Brunel University, London, 5–8 September 2010.

live audience, but could not stop. I was overwhelmed by paradoxical relationship between my virtual and actual body.

I grew up in Korean Confucian society, with its rigid rules, constraints and dictates of emotional suppression for women. In my dialogue with my avatar, I felt as if I was saying farewell to my potential self on that screen. I felt longing and conflict between multiple versions of myself located in different realities: social and spiritual, material and immaterial, actual and virtual. The performance was about 30 minutes long and my sensation of grief gradually evolved. Then, I felt a strange sense of relief, as if some barricade had melted away. This experience gave me idea that my avatar could be used to explore multiple states of self and self-actualization, mediated by virtual technology.

Humanistic psychology understood self-actualization as a process that fulfils its full potential and from this, there is a tendency to develop a healthy state of being (Rogers 1961; Maslow 1962). Advanced virtual reality (VR)/ augmented reality (AR) technology allows the process of self-actualization to be augmented and expanded with virtual bodies and virtual realities, highlighting diverse states of the self and reality, exploring 'the virtual' as the full potential of human experience. Gilles Deleuze defines the virtual as a kind of potentiality that becomes fulfilled in the actual (1988: 96–100). Slavoj Žižek explains the virtual as an emergent radical shift in perspective demonstrated in quantum physics (2004: 4). In quantum reality, there is a moment where one can acknowledge paradoxical conflicts between multiple states and where a radical shift of perception emerges. It is akin to the principle of drama therapy and finding the moment of spontaneity, creativity and potentiality within a dramatic paradox. The exploration of multiple states of self and realities is a core aspect of drama therapy (Landy 1996) that has a long history of developing diverse methods, techniques and theories that can be useful to reflect on the experience of self in multiple realities and now contemporarily mediated by virtual technology.

During the *Parting on Z* performance, I was acting out multiple roles: the son of a royal family, the daughter of a prostitute and also the virtual and real actor. The virtual layer supported interesting relationships in a mixed-reality theatrical setting. My expanded relationship with a virtual body on-screen brought a new aspect of self-actualization, playing in between the space of the actual and virtual.

Since 2014, I have explored the avatar life-review platform for older adults, called the 'VoicingElder' project. I have held ten avatar life-review sessions at the Brookdale Gayton Terrace senior living centre in Richmond, VA, USA. In the sessions, participant residents chose an avatar and told autobiographical stories. They faced their avatars on-screen, and told the stories to themselves and others, speaking through avatars that lip-synced their speech and mirrored their body movements. When they shared emotional stories, the research team provided background visuals and sounds corresponding to their feelings, for example, happiness, anger, sadness, anxiety, fear, laughter, to enhance the emotional impact of their memories. Beautiful things have happened: a lady burst into tears at the end of her father's story; a gentleman had a conversation with a female avatar who is his elementary school teacher and tried to hug her physically on-screen. After each storytelling, without exception, the storyteller was surrounded by crowds including artists, residents and staff expressing deep empathetic connections. Currently we have started a new project called 'VoicingHan' – an avatar oral-history storytelling platform designed to facilitate memory and support the creation of

personalized narratives for individuals with trauma-related memories, such as combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

This article will examine ongoing avatar life-review projects, in the light of drama therapy concepts and methods, exploring a hybrid model of avatar/drama therapy in a virtually mediated environment.

DRAMATIC PARADOX

Drama therapist and theorist Robert Landy underlines 'paradox' as the heart of dramatic experience, calling it the 'dramatic paradox'. He explained that there are diverse layers of paradox in the human condition, such as mind/body, thought/action, subject/object and actor/observer (Landy 2001: 380). The fact that the actor and the role are both separate and merged, in a coexistence of fictional and nonfictional reality, is the most significant aspect of dramatic paradox (Landy 1996: 11). Diderot (1957) first wrote about dramatic paradox and explained that it is the essential complexity and mystery of the dramatic process in everyday life, theatre performance or therapy. Acknowledging paradox is a starting point for a new harmony, balance and healing. In my understanding of Korean ritual, paradox is not considered a negative; it is rather a positive driving force for change and transformation and a challenge to stimulate creative flow (Ryu 2014). For example, Han, the most important element of the Korean mind/emotion model, is a paradoxical state of consciousness that combines an extreme state of grief but with a great hope and desire for overcoming a seemingly impossible situation. It is a springboard for attaining a state of transformation.

Dramatic paradox is a key aspect of healing through drama therapy (Landy 1996: 11) as evidenced by the results of the 'VoicingElder' project. The paradox is manifested in many dimensions with the simultaneous existence of opposites. During the session the older-adult user faced the avatar on-screen, allowing him/her to be both the actor and the observer of one's own performance, and the storyteller/listener simultaneously. The set-up was a mixed-reality setting where we could see both the avatar on the screen and the participant in the space. The avatar was projected at a size similar to the user in order to create a balance between the virtual and the actual body facing each other. The standing screen was installed diagonally and the user sat on the chair in front. The mixture of on-screen avatar and the user facing each other offers a coexistence of different realities, supporting the notion of a dramatic paradox. The participant's experience in a mixed-reality setting is critically different from that of augmented or fully immersive VR, where boundaries are completely erased. The session was held in a public theatre, where there was an uneasy tension between the private and public. However, creativity emerged from these paradoxical tensions, gradually allowing the participants to become spontaneous storytellers.

The drama therapist, Renee Emunah explains dramatic paradox at the level of human consciousness as

[...] a dual level of consciousness, which humans are capable of at a remarkably early age, is at place; the player exists simultaneously in the imaginary realm and the objective realm.

(Emunah 1993: 5)

The mature psyche of the older adults supports a dual level of consciousness between the lived body and the biological body and between the ageless body



Figure 1: Residents watching a participant's avatar performance, June 2016. Gayton Terrace Senior Living, Richmond, VA. Photo: Brianna Ondris. © Semi Ryu.

and the ageing body (Fairhurst 1998: 258–75; Faircloth 2003: 81). It is common for older adults to perceive themselves a lot younger than their actual age, demonstrating an immaterial dimension to their self-perception. Their self-perception exists in the material and immaterial realms simultaneously as they manage creative tensions and paradox. In drama therapy, the actor finds a way to transform into a state of being that holds the opposite realities together (Landy 1996: 11).

During the avatar storytelling, the border between actual life and the fictional story is also dissolved as life memory is reflected onto the imaginary realm with playful energy. Even if the participant attempts to make up a fictional story around the avatar, it is related to real-life memory unconsciously. In multiple realities, such borders between fiction and the real begin to dissolve. Fiction begins to look like biography, autobiography and history (Gergen 2000: 116).

Digital culture fundamentally deals with paradox in an effort to join a human and a machine. This paradoxical marriage in digital virtual space provides new dimensions of the self, with emergent modes of paradox, transformation and realization. It is a new dimension of dramatic paradox.

MULTIPLE SELF-STATES: ROLES

Drama therapists describe the self in terms of roles as multifaceted elements of the social world. Robert Landy considers a role as a 'basic unit of personality containing specific qualities that provide uniqueness and coherence to that unit' (1996: 230). Many social scientists use the term role as a metaphor to analyse everyday psychological, social or cultural life (Goffman 1959; Brissett and Edgley 1975). The group of social psychological theorists known as the symbolic interactionists understand role as multifaceted and essential in building personality (Landy 1996: 21). The founder of psychodrama, J. L. Moreno, understood that roles are dynamically reshaped through interaction. The personality is developed as one plays out many roles (Moreno 1946; Johnson and Emunah 2009: 395). In the digital age, we see multiple states of self and roles embedded in our language of technology, such as the

'role-playing game', 'virtual', 'real', 'augmented' and 'avatar'. Our internal process of role-playing has been externalized through a digital apparatus and emerges onto the front stage of digital culture.

The 'VoicingElder' project supported role-playing by providing eight avatars – four females and four males – with representations of four developmental states: child, teenager, young adult and older adults. The participants related their memory by selecting an avatar and speaking through it, playing different ages and genders. The process of role-playing and acting out the diverse roles provided easy access to build new perspectives about one's life, memory and self- perception.

In Landy's role method, there are two steps before playing out a role: (1) invoking the role and (2) naming it. He describes that '[t]he invocation of role, is a calling into being of that part of the person that will inspire a creative search for meaning' (Landy 1996: 47). For this process, he uses the method of movement warm-up, asking people to focus on one part of their bodies and to allow a movement to extend and a character to emerge. Also, naming is important as it concretizes the chosen role. This allows people to immerse into fictional and creative reality, 'oneself' and 'not oneself' simultaneously. He considered 'the healing potential of role' as '[...] it positions the role taker or role player within the dramatic paradox of "me" and "not me"' (Landy 1993: 47).

The avatar provides easy access, with an instant transition into the avatar role, without warming up. It is a question about whether and how this process changes aspects of connecting with the role. The selection of the avatar role is quick and easy, supported by technology, but important parts might be missed, in building a deep connection with the role. We may come up with hybrid methods to invoke roles using both traditional and digital methods.

During the 'VoicingElder' session, it was interesting to observe that the female older adult users usually chose the same gender avatar in young adulthood. A blond haired female avatar with a turquoise sweater, in her 30s, became a popular choice among female participants. However, a male user enjoyed choosing a different gender and a younger age, such as childhood. In the second life-review session, Mr W, a 90-year-old man with a husky voice, created an interesting relationship with his avatar, attempting to make conversation with it on-screen. He started his life-review using a boy avatar to tell his story from elementary school. In the middle of the storytelling, he began looking for his teacher. I changed the avatar from a boy to a young woman, upon which he started a conversation with the avatar as if she were his teacher. He pleaded, 'why didn't you love me?', 'come close to me' and 'hug me'.

We paused the role-playing as we judged he was too immersed in the avatar. Then he stood up slowly with his walker, walked to the screen and tried to touch the avatar image. His own shadow in the projector light erased her image. It was a heartbreaking moment for the viewers. In virtually mediated environments, the role-playing and dramatic paradox can be more sophisticated, dynamically exposing a diverse relationship between the actual and the virtual body, conjuring up different aspects of healing.

During the session, we encouraged the older adult participants to name their chosen avatar by saying 'my name is ##, and I am ## years old'. They had the freedom to be a fictional character; however, most of the older adult participants used their real names for their avatars and were reluctant to be someone else. This aspect of the methodology was dramatically changed in my ISEA2017 avatar workshop, where the participants were mostly young



Figure 2: A participant who was trying to hug the avatar who he thought was his elementary school teacher, June 2016. Gayton Terrace Senior Living, Richmond, VA. Photo: Brianna Ondris. © Semi Ryu.

(20s and 30s) and were willing to create a fictional character with their avatar. There is a clear generational and cultural difference about how one responds to an avatar life-review platform that needs to be studied further.

The next project, 'VoicingHan', will explore the customizable features of an avatar that will bring forth different aspects of invoking a role. Also, it will dynamically explore the physical interfaces such as objects or props to add a new dimensions to the process. The avatar selection process will be explored via physical interface, for example, touching a cane for getting old, and a milk bottle for getting younger. Throughout the 'VoicingElder' sessions, we have learned that designing the avatar life-review system is important, but how the system can be used within which setting is crucial. Paul Dourish suggests some anthropological perspectives in his book *Embodiment: Where the Action Is*, emphasizing the importance of the setting where an interactive system occurs (2001). The setting might include many aspects such as space, time, set-up, props, instruction and scripts. There is much to explore in designing a mixed-reality environment.

MOMENT: HERE AND NOW

Jacob L. Moreno situates psychodrama in the 'theater of spontaneity', where individuals respond creatively to emerging situations. Moreno's term for those times when we are most spontaneous is being in the 'moment', which he describes as 'the experience of living in complete harmony and unity while staying connected to social realities of here-and-now' (Johnson and Emunah 2009: 402; Moreno 1953).

Landy describes the moment as a kind of 'aesthetic distance', adopting Thomas Scheff's (1979) three feeling states in terms of distance: under distance, over distance, and aesthetic distance. Whereas under distance is impulsive, out of control, flooded with feeling, and over distance is characterized by too little feeling, causing a wide separation between the actor and role. Landy describes

aesthetic distance as a balance of affect and cognition, which he relates to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of 'flow'. When in 'flow' or at aesthetic distance, an individual is able to be playful, responding spontaneously to new experience and revisiting old experience as if for the first time. (1996: 148–49)

These states can explain the user's embodied state within the virtual body. Underdistance describes immersion: being there. Overdistance is being here. Aesthetic distance is 'here and now', related to Moreno's 'moment' in the theatre of spontaneity. Drama therapy facilitates this constant flow in mixed realities, supporting exploration of the self in diverse dimensions of feeling, role and distance.

During a 'VoicingElder' session, a dynamic personal engagement and emotional involvement emerged, witnessing the possibility of a virtual theatre of spontaneity. In the second session when Mrs C entered the theatre, she began, 'I am going to tell a sad story today'. It was surprising since previous stories told by residents had been positive. I knew telling a sad story would be even harder in this public environment. Mrs C told a story about her father, from when she was 6 years old. He had scolded her badly when she surprised him in jest. She acted out a wonderful dramatic performance identifying strongly with the avatar using broad physical gestures and an animated tone of voice. She concluded with a single sentence, repeated in different voices: 'help me to forgive him'. The first seemed to belong to the avatar, speaking forthrightly, but the second was different – it was Mrs C's voice, weeping and trembling. Her tears surprised us. She confessed that she rarely cries. She spoke of her experience as 'such a good release' and described a sense of 'anonymity' of being able to disclose something, not as herself, but as the avatar.

We do not know what exactly happened to Mrs C's consciousness during her storytelling. As a mediator, I fully observed her performance the entire time. I never imagined that she would end her story in tears. She looked confident, playful and humorous during the time of the storytelling, acting



Figure 3: A participant telling her story dynamically using the avatar gesture, June 2016. Gayton Terrace Senior Living, Richmond, VA. Photo: Brianna Ondris. © Semi Ryu.

out of the virtual body with her animated voice, quite engaged with the audience. At the end of her story when she repeated the same sentence twice, the first speech was neutral and strong, 'acting out' as the avatar voice. However, during the second try, her voice and body were trembling and shaking, in the process of 'acting in'. She returned back to her actual body, transformed from the fictional version of her, to the real one. First, she was immersed in the avatar, and then, she returned back to her own body, with an important realization. Three stages of enlightenment in Korean Seon Buddhism support this process, which will be explained later. The dramatic paradox exists in the process of alternating 'acting out' and 'acting in', with a paradoxical state of embodiment. Embodiment describes how complex emotional states trigger memories that are crucial to the healing process (Burkitt 1999; Uttl et al. 2008). Paul Dourish (2001) defines embodiment as possessing and acting through a physical manifestation in the world, and also as phenomena that by their very nature occur in real time and real space, in the case of digital media. Embodiment is a form of participatory state in a broad perspective and has been critiqued as an ambiguous term in the discourses of digital media (Bayliss 2007).

Phil Jones writes about embodiment in drama therapy:

[...] On a general level embodiment concerns the way a client physically expresses and encounters material in the 'here and now' of a dramatic presentation.

(Jones 1996: 113)

Susana Pendzik (2006) uses similar language, describing dramatic reality as 'the manifestation of imagination in the here and now'. In cognitive science, Varela et al. (1991) has discussed embodied interaction between a subject and a separate entity in a Buddhist world-view: mindfulness provides insight on embodied cognition, with an integrative model of mind/body, emphasizing the 'here and now'. The idea of highest engagement has always been connected with 'here and now', sometimes described as 'embodiment', 'the moment', 'aesthetic distance', etc.

In digital media, the frequently used terminologies to describe the most meaningful experience are 'embodiment', 'immersion', 'engagement' or 'presence' (Bayliss 2007: 1–6; McMahan 2003: 68–86). Although 'embodiment' and 'immersion' are common terms describing meaningful experience in virtual space, and often used interchangeably in casual parlance, they are associated with almost opposite concepts: 'here' and 'there'. As described before, embodiment is related to 'here and now' whereas the term 'immersion' (Salen and Zimmerman 2003; Calleja 2011) was commonly regarded as a 'being-there' experience. Dynamic experience in a game or virtual space is often described as 'total immersion', carrying a sense that 'you are there' in a virtual world (Heim 1994).

I propose a specialized usage of 'here and now' as it relates to a concept drawn from Korean Seon Buddhism, which might support what happened to Mrs C's storytelling. Korean Seon Buddhism has three stages of enlightenment: before you study Seon, you see mountains as mountains; while studying Seon, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers; but once you attain enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers are again rivers (Kim 2000: 163–69). The beginning and ending sequences look the same but represent a different conception of reality.

In light of Seon, 'here and now' is a different dimension of 'here'. It can be regarded as a meta-state of here, 'once again here', as in the third stage of Seon. The same principle applies to the Korean concept of Han (한), meaning 'one'. Han shifts from a single one to an infinite oneness – meta-oneness. I interpret 'here and now' as 'once again here, and once again now', as a dynamic reflexive state, returning back to reality with a critical shift in perception, awareness and realization.

Korean ritual playfulness, called Shin-Myeong, is a kind of immersive experience. It manifests excitement – leaping to the sky, with astonishing power and speed of emotional transfer, which potentially changes collective consciousness in a group, from 'being there' to 'being there all together' (Collins 1995). However, the important part of the ritual is returning back to the 'here and now' again, manifesting the paradoxical nature of transformation, which supports Mrs C's case of acting out and acting in.

The state of Moo-A occurs in the climax of a Korean ritual. Consciousness moves to the meta-layer, with a shift of focus to the horizon (Odin 2001). Everything looks exactly the same, but a crucial difference is made in our perception and consciousness, which can be considered an ultimate state of embodied cognition in the 'here and now'. In other words, the 'here and now' is 'simultaneously here and there' or 'neither here nor there' in a quantum state of paradox. It is the state of dramatic paradox, providing routes to therapeutic metacognition.

CONCLUSION

With the advancement of speech technology, we are just beginning to explore digital orality. Water Ong (2002) distinguishes between primary orality, which is associated with oral cultures, and second orality, which is influenced by a co-evolving literate culture. A digital third orality promises to more richly address aspects previously underappreciated under the regime of literacy – such as emotion, memory, intuition, spontaneity and improvisation. In Theodore Sarbin's approach to drama therapy, the role-player eventually becomes a storyteller, making sense of his or her existence through stories that support my avatar life-review project's exploration of the third orality (1986).

Avatar life-review established a basic system to support drama therapy, allowing the user to be a spontaneous storyteller and actor, via lip-synchronization and full-body tracking. Our next phase of research will further explore sentimental response in continuous speech, precise body detection and advanced VR/AR technology, and develop a research protocol to facilitate avatar mixed-reality environments in therapeutic settings.

The avatar life-review platform will incorporate techniques/methods of drama therapy and psychodrama such as role playing, role-reversal, doubling, mirroring and soliloquy as a hybrid therapeutic model between VR and theatre. It will address multiple states of self in dramatic paradox, especially for people with traumatic memories, disabilities, memory loss or mental health complications.

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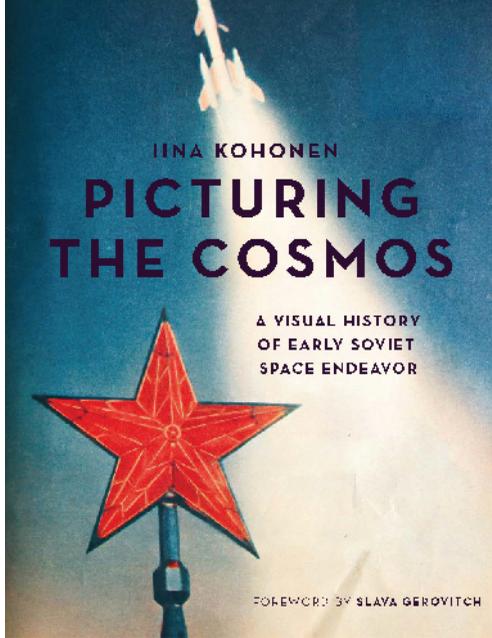
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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Semi Ryu specializes in 3D animation and virtual puppetry based on Korean ritual and oral storytelling. Her artworks and articles have been internationally presented in screenings, exhibitions, performances and publications in twenty countries, including the Chelsea Art Museum, and the book *The Point of Being* (Cambridge Scholars, UK). Since 2014, she has been working on the project 'VoicingElder: Avatar Life-Review for Older Adults' to support memory and intergenerational relationships of older adults. Her next project is 'VoicingHan: Avatar Life-Review Empowering Selves' to support the creation of personalized narratives for individuals with trauma-related memories. Semi is an associate professor in the Department of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University. A South Korean native, she earned a BFA from the Korean National University of Arts, an MFA from Carnegie Mellon University, and currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Digital Anthropology at UOC, Barcelona. For more information, www.semiryu.net.

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Picturing the Cosmos

A Visual History of Early Soviet Space Endeavor

By Lina Kohonen



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Space is the ultimate canvas for the imagination, and in the 1950s and 1960s, as part of the space race with the United States, the solar system was the blank page upon which the Soviet Union etched a narrative of exploration and conquest. In *Picturing the Cosmos*, drawing on a comprehensive corpus of rarely seen photographs and other visual phenomena, **Iina Kohonen** maps the complex relationship between visual propaganda and censorship during the Cold War.

Kohonen ably examines each image, elucidating how visual media helped to anchor otherwise abstract political and intellectual concepts of the future and modernization within the Soviet Union. The USSR mapped and named the cosmos, using new media to stake a claim to this new territory and incorporating it into the daily lives of its citizens. Soviet cosmonauts, meanwhile, were depicted as prototypes of the perfect communist man; representing modernity, good taste and the aesthetics of the everyday. Across five heavily illustrated chapters, *Picturing the Cosmos* navigates and critically examines these utopian narratives, highlighting the rhetorical tension between propaganda, censorship, art and politics.



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