What's My Game Character Worth – The Value Components of MMOG Characters

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ABSTRACT

How does one's game character gain value in online multiplayer game? What are the elements that contribute to the overall virtual identity of a player? Throughout the history of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) game characters have remained central figures for all types of in-game interaction and value perception. Recently, MMOGs have evolved to a stage where at least parts of one's identity are for sale. In this paper, we apply a motivational framework to analyse the specific value structures of one's virtual identity. As a result, we indicate how achievement, social and immersive aspects of one's game character form the personal value that player bestows on the game character. Furthermore, we conclude how these aspects offer possibilities for new business implications on the future MMOGs.

Author Keywords

Game character, Virtual identity, Value perception

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), game characters have been central figures in the game activities. Players have been, and still are, embodied in virtual characters. The social networks are built through the game characters and all the interaction with the game world is channelled via the game character.

While the society has continuously perceived MMOGs as mere fictional playgrounds, these virtual worlds have slowly escaped the boundaries of cyberspace. Recently, numerous examples such as making a profitable business by selling virtual property [2, 6], running a 'gold farmer' company whose only aim is to collect and sell virtual resources [5, 17], and of course the wide spread auctioning of game characters [22, 4] have illustrated the shift and crossover between virtual and real.

Now that the game worlds have received qualities predicted by science fiction authors, like William Gibson [12] with his *Cyberspace*, and Neal Stephenson [20] with his *Metaverse*, it is important to consider the value of virtual assets. Since the game characters reside in the centre of action and function as representations of the players, it is important to consider how players bestow value on their game characters and how they invest in building up the overall virtual identity.

In this article we tackle the question of what is the value of virtual game character in MMOGs. For our analysis we apply a motivational framework based on Yee's [27] categorisation for motivations of play. Based on this we analyse the specific value structures of one's virtual identity. As a result, we indicate how achievement, social and immersive aspects of one's game character form the personal value that players bestow on their game characters. Furthermore, we conclude how these aspects offer possibilities for new business implications on the future MMOGs.

FORMING A VIRTUAL IDENTITY

MMOGs are vast worlds with their own intriguing characteristics and specific features. These worlds may, for example, be about adventures taking place in fantasy realms, warfare in historical settings, or social interaction in digital environments. When entering and taking part into activities present in these worlds, players are faced with many fundamental questions, for example, who they are in the digital domain, how they approach playing together, and how they view their digital embodiment in relation to the surrounding world. In this chapter, these issues are discussed in order to provide background for understanding the aspects of game character value.

Playing Together in MMOGs

Playing together is inherent to both animals and humans. Multiplayer games are by no means a new innovation. Football, ice hockey and numerous other games cater for multiple simultaneous players who jointly participate in creating the overall game experience. Playing together is as old as games themselves - people (and animals) have shared the play experience with their peers since the dawn of existence. There definitely is social function involved with games. To quote the words of Roger Caillois: *"Play is not merely an individual pastime. It may not even be that as frequently as is supposed."* [7] Actually, one of the seminal

accounts on playful culture discussed by Johan Huizinga [14] starts by illustrating the young puppies playing together and experiencing tremendous fun and enjoyment while doing so.

This pull towards social play activity can be seen as one of the driving forces behind the evolution of multiplayer online game worlds. As commented by Csikszentmihalyi [8], almost every activity is more enjoyable with other person around, and less so when one does it alone. People seem to be more happy, alert, and cheerful if there are others present, compared to how they feel alone. Based on this, it has been only a matter of time – and technological development – before the social togetherness transferred into the domain of virtual worlds.

If the digital game is played together with other people, the social interplay is enhanced by numerous traditions that are inherent in the interactions of physical world. The greatest advantage of these multiplayer games is that they transform computer games into truly social experiences. The social bonding can be so strong that it becomes one of the most important motivating factors for people to play games [18]. Furthermore, the social presence of other human beings demands additional skills from the players. In most of the multi-player games, social skills are needed, or must be developed in order to succeed [1]. All these skills and actions need a platform where they are projected from. This is where the avatars, or game characters, come into the picture.

Game Character – a Body for Interaction

The main difference between virtual worlds and the physical one is the need for an avatar, or a game character, to act as a representation of one's physical self. The game character can generally take any form, shape, or a specific perspective [11]. Since the avatar is the proxy for most of the actions the player performs in the virtual world, without it the player is nothing in MMOG – the player does not exist and, hence, there is no value to be calculated. The importance of game character originates from the early pen'n'paper role-playing games (e.g., [13]) where your main aim was to execute adventurous quests and develop the stats of your game character while doing so. The game character became a tool for player's actions. The role-playing, fighting, micro-management and all the other actions were channelled through game character.

Furthermore, a game character in MMOGs is also one's interface to other human players [11]. Game characters are constantly read and interpreted. The expressions and movements, performed by the players, are communicated through the game characters into the game world. Players adjust their behaviour and decide their responses based on the cues they read from other game characters. Moreover, besides being an interface between individual players or the player and the game world, player can form a relationship directly with the game character. By giving the game character a sense of personality, unique behaviour,

intentions, and style, the player starts to understand the game character as a second self, as something to protect and worry about, as one's role in the virtual game world. [11].

While the game worlds consist of a variety of objects rather than just a collection of game characters, many of the actions revolve around these virtual proxies. There may be a possibility to buy a house (a home for the game character), collect better armour and weapons (protection for the game character), or just chat with your fellow players (words projected out of the game character). The game character, hence, is the focal point of virtual realms. While the games have evolved during the past 30 years, the importance of the avatars has remained.

ASPECTS OF GAME CHARACTER VALUE

Since game characters play essential part in participating game activities, we will examine the elements that constitute game character's value to the player. As a framework for different game character value components, we use Yee's [27] categorisation for motivations of play in online games. Yee's model is formed through factor analytic approach utilising survey data collected from 3000 players on several different MMOGs (e.g. *EverQuest*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Ultima Online*, and *Star Wars Galaxies*). Yee [27] divides motivations of play into three main categories: *achievement*, *social* and *immersion*. These categories are further divided into subcategories that depict the nature of each category in more detail (Table 1). In our examination, we use the main categories to structure the discussion and point out examples that relate to the subcategories.

Table 1: Motivations of play in online games [27].

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement	**Socializing**	**Discovery**
Progress, Power, Accumulation, Status	Casual Chat, Helping Others, Making Friends	Exploration, Lore, Finding Hidden Things
Mechanics	**Relationship**	**Role-Playing**
Numbers, Optimization, Templating, Analysis	Personal, Self-Disclosure, Find and Give Support	Story Line, Character History, Roles, Fantasy
Competition	**Teamwork**	**Customization**
Challenging Others, Provocation, Domination	Collaboration, Groups, Group Achievements	Appearances, Accessories, Style, Color Schemes
		Escapism
		Relax, Escape from RL, Avoid RL Problems

Achievement Value of a Game Character

Salen and Zimmerman [19] define game as *"a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by*

rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." Even though they criticise role-playing games having no final end game (i.e., final quantifiable outcome), they agree that session-to-session missions or quests may have quantifiable outcomes. Besides the quests, game character development has stages that can be seen as quantifiable outcomes. In MMOG, a player needs to invest time in learning how to play the game character. Creating competent enough game character for the challenging quests is a long and time consuming process. In the beginning game characters have only modest skills that need to be trained. Completing quests, slaying beasts, crafting artefacts, or harvesting minerals gain experience points that at times result in levelling up. In this manner the game character advances periodically towards the chosen direction (e.g., becomes more skilful warrior, thief, or bard).

Completion of the quests and levelling up the game character statistics (i.e., the quantifiable outcomes) are clearly achievements for the player who controls the game character. According to Yee [27], achievement is one of the thriving forces for playing an online game. Players get satisfaction from advancing, competing, and being self sufficient in the game. Players enjoy becoming better in achieving the chosen objectives and excelling over each other.

Achievement value of the game character can, therefore, be seen as covering two main aspects: 1) the elements that constitute to the overall numerical competence of the game character in the game world, and 2) the status achieved either through social dealings or through excellence in competing with other players or mighty non-player opponents. Elements constituting to the overall numerical competence of the game character are the artefacts and wealth the player acquires for the game character (such as weapons, armour, potions, gold, and even virtual property), as well as the improvements in the game character's skilfulness (i.e., the statistics). The aspect of the status is harder to measure. However, it sums up in the admiration the player, or her game character, receives from her fellow players. The greater the legend you become amongst your online friends, the better the feeling.

Social Value of a Game Character
Most of the MMOGs cater for activities other than pure gameplay. This provides players a possibility to select goals of their personal liking, or to simply hang around in the game environment. The freedom allows players to share their experiences about the game but also strengthens the possibilities for the emergence of more permanent play-communities. As Huizinga [14] argues: "*A play-community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. Of course, not every game [...] leads to the founding of a club. But the feeling of being "apart together" in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.*" Therefore, game

character's value is not only in how competent it has become game-wise, but also in the areas of social connections and experiences built during and after the gameplay.

Many of the quests in MMOGs are built to encourage teamwork. It is often really hard, or even impossible, to complete certain quests without teaming-up with a properly formed group (i.e., the group having game characters with complementing skills) [15]. Furthermore, the death of a game character often results in the loss of experience points. This type of mechanism requires players to trust in each other. The life of your game character is often in the hands of your team players. If you do not manage to communicate properly, or, if your group members decide to flee in the midst of the raging battle, your game character is most likely to die. After playing several quests within a same group, or after taking part in guild activities, the player and her game character start to gain reputation. Some of the players are known as trouble makers while others are known of their just behaviour and/or good playing skills [15].

Social value of the game character concerns aspects related to other players. The value can be considered at least from two perspectives: 1) meaningful social interaction with other players, and 2) the image of the player formed in the eyes of fellow players. The social value is, therefore, a resource to form meaningful connections that, at their basic level, provide a possibility for casual communication and teamwork. On a deeper level the casual connections can turn into friendships, or even romantic relationships, in which the social value may well exceed the boundaries of mere game.

The image of the player comes into the picture especially in the organised forms of social play, such as, guilds and other consistent groups. It is not necessarily the other players that form the addictive component, but the image one gets of oneself from other players [9]. Furthermore, in guild activities concepts such as *trust* and *reputation* become essential as part of the player image [15]. Some of the guilds require a certain amount of playing hours or certain percentage of attendance in guild activities, such as, meetings and raids. If you are willing to live up to your *responsibilities,* you may advance in the guild. If you fail to meet the requirements, you may be kicked out. Letting someone else to play your game character could, therefore, potentially result in tremendous consequences.

Immersive Value of a Game Character
Immersion into the MMOG can be achieved through many different elements. Yee's [27] subcategories list elements, such as, discovery, role-playing, customisation and escapism. What, however, is elemental from the game character point-of-view, is the need for the player to be able to identify with the game character. Sociologist Gary Alan Fine [10] discusses the importance of identifying with the game character and comments that "*players must invest*

their character with meaning. [...] For identification, the character must have attributes that permit a player to esteem that persona." Quite similarly, but from a bit different point-of-view, Friedl [11] argues that "*if a player has the possibility to give this avatar a sense of personality and contribute his unique behaviour, intentions, and style to the game world, he will establish an individual relationship with the character.*"

MMOGs commonly provide game characters that have attributes such as distinctive appearance, changeable clothing, as well as, armour and weaponry that indicate the desired playing style. Furthermore, interaction with other players and the game world, offers possibilities to develop and share a unique personality, story lines and game character history. This type of interaction enables the role-playing of the game character. The role-playing may be about constructing and representing a fictive persona, or just an experimentation of the selected parts of actual self [21]. However, the persona of the game character does not form immediately. When playing a game character for a long time, the player starts to identify with it and begins to feel what the game character "feels" [10].

Based on the aforementioned theories, immersive value of the game character deals with aspects that build up an image of the game character which in turn makes establishment of an individual relationship possible. A player may not be actively trying to role-play the game character, but through discovering the world, taking part in quests, and socialising with other players, an image of the game character starts to emerge. This image can be further altered through customisation of appearance and style of the game character. Player invests her time and shares memorable adventures with her game character. If the player also empathises with the game character, it is possible to immerse into the game character. The investment of time and the empathic approach may also result in player wanting to think back the events shared with, and qualities built for, the game character. In this way the game character gains sentimental value.

Overlapping Value Elements
Even though players may have clearly dominating motivations to play, it is common that the overall motivation arches over multiple elements [27]. Most of the MMOGs have been built to require multiple motivations to be pursued, in order to advance in the game. It is, for example, hard to explore the world (immersion) without developing your game character (achievement), since some areas have such powerful foes that the low-level game character would not be able to survive. Similarly, as already noted earlier, many of the quests are built to encourage teamwork, hence game character development and social communication are equally important. The overall value of the game character cannot, thus, be measured by basing it on a single value component.

The overall value of the game character can be seen as a sum of the achievement, social and immersive components (Figure 1). Depending on the case, one or more value components will be emphasised. By using this model, the game activities and player preferences can be analysed and their effects on the gaming community with potential business implications can be considered. For example, a player may dislike levelling up the game character, but because of the immersive and/or social motivations he needs to pursue the achievement element. In this case, she might want to buy a higher level game character without needing to go through the tedious achievement process. These types of opportunities can, however, have reflections on how other value components are viewed. The value of the game character becomes evident only through the individual relationship formed via interaction between the player and her game character.
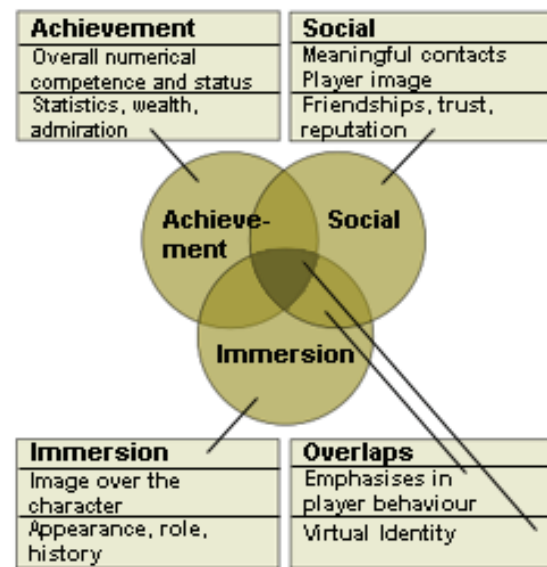

Figure 1: Different value components overlap and sum up as the overall value.

The relationship between a player and her game character forms during a period of time that can, for many players, be rather substantial. The players will generally go through most of the motivational forces - at least to try these out. Some parts of the game character may be more or less trivial for the player, but can nevertheless contribute to the overall image of the game character. A player may, for example, purchase some additional levels for her game character, but this does not necessarily mean that the game character's identity becomes different. It is the overall time the player invests in different value components that matters to the player. The interaction between the player and the game character creates a *role* which becomes the *virtual identity* the player assumes while present in the

game world. It is this virtual identity that holds the value of the game character in the online game worlds.

EXAMPLES OF VALUE PERCEPTION AND CONSTRUCTION

In this Section, we illustrate a series of empirical cases that offer insight into the various value constructing examples evident in MMOGs. The examples are organised according to the aforementioned player motivation model and each of the cases illustrate different approaches to perceived value of a game character.

Achievement Value

Achievements can be seen in the game character. High-level game character's armour and weapons have become different, game character possesses items that low-level game characters haven't even heard of and game character has guts to attack powerful foes. But what is the worth of all the levels? Basically everyone can reach high levels. MMOGs are rather easy to play but instead ask a lot of time and patience (at least if concentrating on improving game character statistics to high levels). This has provided opportunities for virtual artefact sales. Companies such as *Gamepal.com* buy and sell game characters, levels, gold and other valuables that can be used in the game. The service includes many of the existing MMOGs, such as *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest 2* and *Star Wars Galaxies*. For example, a general price for a *World of Warcraft* account having 50-60 level game character is ranging between $200 to $400 and power levelling of one's existing game character costs about $20 to $300 depending on wanted levels. In this way, if a player finds levelling a tedious task, she can cut down the game character development time and make a short cut to the activities requiring high-level game characters.

However, the achievement value cannot be measured only in gained levels. Value is also reached through the advancement of the game character itself. A player may receive sheer joy from the advancement as in: "*It gives me the illusion of progress, I know that. I hate the level of frustrated progress in the r/w so I play the game and lvl up instead. It is *crack* for the achievement center of the brain, like cocaine affects the pleasure center.*" (M, 34) [26]. Often advancement is, however, also used to gain recognition from other players as is obvious in: "*I basically play these games to become the most powerful force the game can allow. I want the best of the best items and people to truly respect my play style. I want to become a legend among players within the virtual mmorpg world!*" (M, 25) [26]. But what happens to the value of a game character when the player buys it from a shop instead of investing all the time in fine-tuning the game character stats? Is the player still proud of her game character? Or, more importantly, is the player having fun?

The boundaries between play and work seem to be immediately demolished when one thinks about the value of achievement. If the player decides to invest her time in advancing her game character, there is a great chance of playing becoming work. Or, as stated by a competitive player: "*My desire to stay competitive drives me to want to level fast, min-max, and gain rare drops. Those things in themselves aren't important to me, and I'd really rather it weren't important to the game, but if I intend to be competitive I've got to do the work to have the fun.*" (M, 19) [26]. The value of achievement, in this case, is so high that the player is voluntarily 'working' in order to reap the rewards in the form of occasional fun – and all of this in-game. Naturally, he could just purchase the laborious parts of the resource-gathering and invest his time on the more *ludic* activities. Value, as in all of these cases, is in the eye of the beholder.

Social Value

Players in MMOGs approach in-game relationships differently. Some regard them as being superficial while others value them similar to real life relationships [24]. The approach a player takes on the game will have an effect on relationship forming. One player comments the issue of whether relationships in MMOGs are meaningful as following: "*I've made many friends in games who become outside-of-game friends because we have a lot in common, same maturity level, looking for the same things in a friendship, and just click. I would call these very meaningful. But I also have many friends in games who are just sort of there to pass the time while I play... they're silly and fun to chat with... but I'd never want to deal with them outside of the game. Those relationships I would label as superficial*" (F, 22) [24]. According to Yee [24], it is common to form lasting online friendships. The results reveal that 40% of the players feel that their online friends are comparable - or better - than their real life friends. This clearly suggests that the social role assumed in the virtual community adds immensely to the overall value of the game character. Many players have made good friends and some even got romantically involved through online relationships [25].

Guilds are rather common structure for organising play in MMOGs. The guilds offer an interface for getting familiar with gaming communities. Through a guild a player can find regular company to tackle different quests. Casual friends or even friendships formed through a guild activities are, however, not the only social value guilds have to offer. Since guilds are active communities arranging playable content, they need players to organise various tasks. By being active in guild organisation, a player can improve her social skills but also learn skills such as organising and leading. One player describes this as following: "*Last year, I was elected as the leader of the guild I'm part of when our old leader (a good RL friend) left. At first, I was a bit concerned about my ability to organize 100 some people from all over the world, but, as it turned out, I learned that I was much more organized that I had thought I would be, and ... that I had an uncanny knack for diplomacy and leadership. The experience made me feel very empowered,*

and good about myself [...]" (F, 34) [23]. This suggests that MMOGs can have life changing effects.

Perhaps the most interesting set of case examples considers the far reaching and intense effects of social values. For example, *"A Story About a Tree"* by Raph Koster is signifying the issue that MMOGs are not "just a game" [3]. In this case, a player named Karyn was found missing from the *LegendMUD* and after a quick check on her personal website, the community realised she had died two months ago. This started an immediate outpouring of grief in *LegendMUD*. There were numerous email consolidations, memorial service, and even a garden of remembrance with a tree bearing a plaque: "In memory of Karyn." [3]. Whether real stories or urban legends, the heart-breaking accounts of genuine sense of loss over someone the players have never actually met in real life, signify the uttermost personal value. The value of a player feeds the value of community, and *vice versa*.

Immersion Value
In terms of customisation, as part of the immersion component in the motivation model, the current value structures are more or less straightforward. You either invest your time in collecting personal gear, or, you pay extra to become more individual. The extra-payment scheme is actually a valid business model of the likes of *RuneScape* and *Habbo Hotel*. While the basic entry is free, you can purchase something extra with real money and, thus, become different from everybody else. For example, in *Second Life* you can spend your (real) dollars to customise your avatar. The science-fiction vision of Stephenson's [20] *Metaverse,* with its budget-segregated avatars, seems to become more concrete year by year.

The final set of value cases is perhaps the most difficult to concretise since the concept of immersion – by nature – is highly psychological. There are, however, some typical trends in MMOGs that provide us clues about the potential value structures. Let us start with our personal expedition as *Gopher Tail Minstrels (or GTM)*. GTM was a group of adventurers in the world of *Asheron's Call 2* who, just out of curiosity, and for the sake of fun, formed a party of troubadours. The main point here was not the public performances – although those occurred frequently and usually with keen crowds – but the role-playing of something that fell outside of the pure hack-and-slash pursue of experience points. After several months of gigs, numerous explorations to remote and desolate areas, and constant gathering of data (i.e., screenshots), the motivation to play faded. However, the memory of GTM never disappeared. After a disastrous server crash, the only survived screenshot (Figure 2) remains as a testimonial of the days long-gone. The price tag for the additional images might easily become phenomenal, since there is no other concrete evidence of the life of GTM.

Figure 2: Gopher Tail Minstrels in action somewhere in the realm of Asheron's Call 2.

Actually, the case of Gopher Tail Minstrels is by no means unique. The loss of one's game character may well be more than just a loss of virtual artefact. And people may react very strongly in that kind of situation: *"On December 25th, 2006 I woke up to a big surprise. No, not a big pile of presents! I woke up to find my World of Warcraft character no longer existed. You may say, 'Sure it's just a video game, what's the big deal?' Oh, when you put 286 days of playtime in one character, it is a huge deal."* [16]. This player, according to his own testimonial, was prepared to sue the guilty party with no expenses saved approach. He continues: *"Now, for the fun part. Finding a law firm that will pursue this case. I will be suing for the 286 days of life this man stole from me, and the $2000 it cost me to figure out everything about him."* The value, in this case, is not just memories. It can grow to become something even money cannot buy.

DISCUSSION
The aforementioned cases provide some practical implications for business and for creating personal value for the player through the game character. In a business sense MMOGs have opened new doors for selling virtual artefacts. The spin-off businesses (e.g., auctions, gold farming, power-levelling, etc.) all have added to the original economy model of the MMOGs. The virtual is no more bound within the frames of formal computer systems. The cross-over to the real world has come to stay.

In a game character sense MMOGs have provided players with artefacts that can be personally created. It is not necessary to play in a certain manner or to follow a certain pre-defined path of game character development. Players can choose these themselves. They can create the appearance, behaviour, skills and social networks of their liking in a world that is not 'just' playground in the virtual

domain, but it is also a world that now offers possibilities for making one's living.

In their own field MMOGs are, thus, rapidly advancing our shift towards game society. Basic ICT and Internet skills will not be enough since people need to master games and playing. The more value your game character gains, the more important part it will have in the everyday life. Furthermore, people may need to master the business models and structures of virtual economies - with all the ripple effects to and from our real economies. The secondary markets with trading of virtual assets outside the MMOGs, and the novel but difficult to harness value chains provide interesting challenges for both researchers and practitioners. Similarly the issue of virtual identity will challenge all of us to consider how play and work resides side by side in the virtual worlds.

Still, perhaps the strongest implication of the evolution of MMOGs might be the level of persistency these worlds possess. They currently do have a limited, yet substantial in duration, life span of 5-15 years. What will be the outcome if we truly have MMOG aggregators and systems that can keep game characters current year after year? Players may easily value their characters even more. At the same time game characters will most likely evolve to more sophisticated virtual beings. The player will have the possibility to step into a virtual body that not only offers expressive tool for communication and play but also caters for engaging self expression.

Finally, the question of what is the value of one's virtual identity in the online game community remains a multifaceted problem. Since the perception of value differs greatly from one player to another, there is no concrete solution to the problem. However, through the motivational framework, and by illustrating the role of the game character as main tool to operate in MMOGs, we are able to indicate the specific value structures that emerge. If the future business models and game design are able to harness these basic value components, there may be room for development in MMOGs. With diversified added value mechanisms and clear option to select one's personal format of investment, the online games could truly become the *cyberspaces* and *metaverses* of tomorrow where the players can step into a virtual body that offers them a tool to live out their aspirations through versatile and valuable self expression.

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