Chapter 17
Ancestor Veneration Avatars

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ABSTRACT

It is possible at the present time to create virtual representations of deceased loved ones, and inhabit them as a way of expressing reverence and of dealing with one's own feelings of loss, as demonstrated by this study in which 18 Ancestor Veneration Avatars (AVAs) were created. Most obviously, this can be done in massively multiplayer online role-playing games and comparable non-game virtual worlds. The identity of any individual person contains fragments of other people, most especially members of one's family. In addition, people play a variety of roles, adopting identities temporarily that are more or less distinct from each other. Furthermore, a number of social scientists and commentators have suggested that individuals have become protean or multiplex, as rapid social change, multiculturalism, and the division of labor have eroded the functionality of unified identities. Finally, secularization has undercut traditional religious ways of managing feelings toward deceased relatives. A remarkable deduction from these observations is that many people should consider playing the role of a deceased loved one through an avatar in an online gameworld, as a form of emotionally satisfying ancestor veneration.

INTRODUCTION

This is believed to be the first extensive study of Ancestor Veneration Avatars (AVAs). Of necessity, the methodology is unusual, inspired by the techniques called *ethnography* by anthropologists, *participant observation* by sociologists, and *phenomenology* by philosophers. It can be described as the most *personal* form of personal computing, violating the normal scientific assumption of objectivity. Yet, especially for an exploratory study, there is no reason why an intensely personal experience of exploration cannot achieve new insights that can be treated as hypotheses to be tested later by more rigorous means. Thus, it may not be indecent for me to write about my research pretending to be each of 18 deceased members of my own family, nor for me to suggest that ancestor veneration may blossom into an entire new industry, based on modern information technology.

SOCIAL SCIENCE BACKGROUND

A significant challenge for every human culture has been how to deal with death, not only one's own impending demise, but also the loss of friends and especially the loss of parents (Chidester, 1990). Anthropologists have found that what they call *ancestor worship* is a prominent feature of "primitive religion," and some suggest that gods are merely ascended ancestors who have gradually lost their original identities (Fortes, 1961). As Weston La Barre put this controversial point, "A god is only a shaman's dream about his father" (La Barre, 1972, p. 19; cf. Freud, 1946). Other theories of the origin of religion exist, notably the view that religion evolved from earlier traditions of magic in order to compensate people emotionally in situations of loss, deprivation, and inescapable frustration (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; 1987). Thus the term *ancestor veneration* may be more appropriate than *ancestor worship* for a wider range of social contexts and theoretical approaches, because it does not necessarily deify the ancestors, yet implies some continuing devotion to them after their deaths. Here the term refers to all deceased relatives, whether or not they were in the direct ancestral line of descent.

Individuals may differ on exactly why they might wish to engage in symbolic activities related to departed family members, because several distinct emotional and cognitive processes may be at work, in different degrees for different people. Some may feel guilt that they were not sufficiently kind to the family member when they were alive, and may even harbor nagging feelings that they might have prevented the death in some way. They might conceptualize a parent's devotion to them while a child as a debt that must be repaid. Others may have been emotionally dependent upon the departed persons, and unable fully to escape the sense of needing them. Many of the skills and intellectual knowledge of the venerator may have been learned from the departed one, and thus a memory of the departed is stimulated whenever those abilities are used.

One of the recent cognitive theories of religion derives belief in gods from the human ability to conceptualize the thoughts, feelings, and motives of other people (Boyer, 2001; Atran, 2002). Given how important it was for people to be able to understand the behavior of partners, prey, and predators in the East African homeland of humanity, this *mindreading* ability is very powerful and at times can become hyperactive. In particular, humans may read personality into complex natural systems, such as attributing thunder to Jupiter or Thor. A different result is the possibility that our minds contain semi-autonomous models of the minds of the other people most important to us, and these models will continue to function semi-autonomously after the death of the person from whom they originated. It is easy to exaggerate this cognitive phenomenon, but there is a sense in which we contain within us the souls of loved ones. It is more obviously true that humans have the capacity to play multiple roles, and some psychologists have even argued that this ability has increased in recent centuries, as a complex society and fluctuating conditions have eroded the basis for a stable, unitary self (Lifton, 1971; cf. Goffman, 1956; Erikson, 1968; Fuller, 1970). A *protean self* plays multiple roles over time, whereas a *multiplex self* plays multiple roles simultaneously.

This line of analysis brings us to the concept of *avatar*, a term from Hindu religion that has been applied to the manifestation of a user in a computer-generated virtual world or online multi-player game. Throughout Indo-European religions - those of the ancient Greeks and Romans as well as the Hindus - deities took on a variety of forms when they came down to earth. Zeus was a bull when he ravished Europa, but a thunderbolt during the rainstorms that fell on ordinary Greeks. In online virtual worlds, users often have multiple avatars, just as the ancient gods supposedly had multiple aspects, using them one at a time when they came to Earth. For example, in *Second Life*, I have two avatars for several years. Bainbridge Thespian works for the National Science Foundation, man-

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