

Digital monsters: Representations of humans on the Internet

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Abstract. This paper looks at the usage of depictions of monsters as a form of self-representation on the Internet and attempts to discover what may hide behind this choice of the avatar. It endeavours to tie the notions of representation, visuality and monstrosity together, with the avatar at the intersection of images and identities. The purpose of this exploration is to open up a discussion to analyse and elucidate the phenomenon of monstrosity from a semiotic perspective, namely as a form of representation of the human being in the virtual world. The choice of an icon of a monster as avatar establishes a link between image and identity since a certain mind has put it forward as its representative in an effort to prove its own presence to the others with the intention of being seen in a particular way. Communicating this sign over the Internet is akin to the mediaeval carnival where the sign shield stands for the masquerade disguise, allowing one to overcome dogmatism and alienation engendered by the hierarchy of the society through making it possible to contact people of every rank, title or position, allowing one to become free.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, online identity, avatar-mediated visibility, visuality, dialogue, online carnival, monster, avatar

I hurry up my day.
 A sweet anticipation of the evening
 When vexed with every tiniest delay
 I pull the blinds up and opening the window
 Into the world I let the darkness flood
 My heart, my empty heart
 And welcome all the monsters of the universe inside
 And start
 The ball, the show, the feast
 And feel the growing wings behind my back;
 They flap like canvas in the wind. A beast
 Myself, I know I've always lacked
 Two leathern wings
 To soar above the world
 To dance with dragons,
 Or to chase a unicorn,
 To feel the blood of pagans,
 My predecessors, boiling in my veins,
 To bear no bonds, to wear no chains...
 Then morning strikes and all remains
 As it was:
 I'm motionless and haunted by remorse...

If one looks at avatars (small pictures or icons that represent a computer user in an online social network or a game), one may come to the conclusion that most of them bear little or no resemblance to the subject¹ who uploaded the image. Apart from photographs (captured by cameras or web cameras and often enhanced with the help of picture editing tools) one may encounter abstractions, pictures of children, group photos, landscapes, hieroglyphs, fluffy kittens, etc. The use of images of beasts or monsters as a form of self-representation on the net is not such a rarity either. Personal experience of the author's online activity, recapped by the poem, as well as her previous study in the field of visual semiotics (Vavilova 2014), prompted the research question: can the digital monster fully represent its human carrier online, whatever the reasons for its choice are?

In the search for an answer, this paper will look at the usage of depictions of monsters in representing humans on the Internet in an attempt to discover what may hide behind this choice of *representamen* – a term borrowed from Peirce (CP 2.227–2.308) as a synonym for *sign*. It will also seek to tie the notions of representation, visibility and monstrosity together, with the avatar at the intersection of images and identities. Thus it

¹ 'Subject' here means both individuals and collective entities, so-called virtual communities e.g. groups, clubs, people united online by a common feature; the 'virtual world' means the Internet.

will aim to explore the Internet as an arena for personal self-representation, and online identity in particular, in order to discover possible reasons for or factors involved in the choice of a non-human (monstrous) visual image, avatar, to represent its carrier in an online setting (a game, a forum, a chat, etc.). The point made here is that as far as the avatar-mediated visibility is concerned, seeing a picture of a monster involves seeing a person or other subject behind it, since a certain mind (individual, or collective) put it forward as its representative in an effort to prove its own presence to the other;² an effort to be respected and acknowledged as the subject's will.

Our search will begin by examining the phenomenon of computer-mediated communication, with the focus on identity and its disclosure online; the next section will be devoted to avatars and monsters, and the way they can be related to each other. Further analysis will provide a semiotic insight into the notion of avatar-mediated visibility, its semantics, syntax, and pragmatics, leading to the discovery of possible reasons behind the choice of an avatar by a participant of computer-mediated communication.

Computer-mediated communication: The background for online identity

The tendency of computerization in modern society, where the achievements of previous civilizations are transferred into the virtual environment, makes it a matter of utmost necessity to reconsider the role played by the Internet in modern social reality. As far as communication is concerned, this reconsideration is basically aimed at optimizing and eliminating the "side-effects" of computer-mediated communication some of which will be touched upon below.

Computer-mediated communication can be defined as a kind of interpersonal communicative interaction which is realized due to the multimedia potential of the Internet, including the circulation of verbal, video and audio messages. The Internet here can be viewed as a space for constructing social connections that facilitate the inclusion of an individual into the matrix of his or her relations with others, and an environment where these connections are sustained in a specific communicative field that penetrates all social structures and at the same time mediates interpersonal contacts. This mediation means that a participant in computer-mediated communication forms

² Here the term is used in line with Bakhtin's usage, the other as a participant of the dialogue, or someone who leads one of the tunes in a polyphonic text (as opposed to the other as an embodiment of the concept of radical alterity, as an enemy, at its extreme): "*Čužoj* is the opposite of *svoj* [one's own] and implies otherness – of place, point of view, possession or person. It does not (as does "alien" in English) imply any necessary estrangement or exoticism; it is simply that which someone has made his own, seen (or heard) from the point of view of an outsider [...] Being *čužoj* makes dialogue possible" (Bakhtin 1981: 423).

his or her impressions of the other not by viewing, listening to or touching the other (though some of those processes can take place due to the use of such devices as web cameras), but mainly by coming across intangible products of the other's life: e-mails, pictures, voice messages, music, etc.

The use of signs, however, is characteristic of every medium, even television, with its claims to be the mirror of reality, or reality itself; the sign is a medium, thus it is an element of every media system. The major feature that makes the Internet different from other media is, in the author's opinion, a greater extent of individual freedom, for instance the freedom of choice of information to be consumed,³ as well as the freedom of self-representation. Each individual in the digital community is enabled to unveil his or her true self fully, or indeed, to conceal it partially or wholly. Even though identity is conveyed through the exchange of signs, it still takes place in the space of free self-expression, which will be discussed later in more detail. The use of special devices does not discredit the humane nature of online interaction and socialization. On the contrary, it helps one to overcome certain barriers of communication, for instance, being perceived as a carrier of a set of genes, as someone who belongs to a certain race, ethnos, sex, as a person of a certain age, social and marital status, etc. which are, *inter alia*, the factors that traditionally constitute one's identity.

Their online manifestations (indication of race, sex, age, etc. in an online setting) certainly contribute to building and interpreting online (Internet, virtual, digital) identities, but to what extent? Much has been written on the issue of online identity regarding its relation to one's identity in reality (see, for instance, references in Adams 2005⁴); opinions on the formation and communication of online identity range from a perception that it is a total contradiction of reality to the optimistic viewpoint that it is a genuine organic projection of its offline counterpart.

To sustain this discussion, let us define the notion. Internet identity is understood as "the social identity that people develop online, and that exists in the form of the reputation that they acquire (in forum, blogs, etc.), or the network of relationships that they build" (Nabeth 2006: 74). From another angle, it is an actively constructed

³ One of the signs of this so-to-say informational liberation is that online moderation has become a substitute for traditional media gate-keeping with its total control over the topics to be covered and the picture to be shown to substantiate the verbal contents. A moderator is often a common user whose task is not to strangle alternative viewpoints, but rather to filter the contents from commercials or obscenities. Thus information recipients can access multiple angles via a variety of stories present on the Internet.

⁴ Suellen Adams 2005. Information behavior and the formation and maintenance of peer cultures in Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: A case study of City of Heroes. Retrieved from <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/information-behavior-and-the-formation-and-maintenance-of-peer-cultures-in-massive-multiplayer-online-role-playing-games-a-case-study-of-city-of-heroes/>.

self-presentation on the net that allows for a certain varying of personal information. It has been recently discovered that more and more users prefer indicating real data in their personal profiles (names, dates, marital status), which speaks for the tendency to disclose one's true "contents", rather than hide behind a mask of an imagined personality (Asmolov, Asmolov 2009). Today's opponents of the classic works on so-called "identity play", or juggling with multiple identities (e.g. Myers 1987; Turkle 1995) stand on the grounds that the modern Internet user's virtual life is led in harmony with his or her reality, and thus give no food for more futile reflections on the mosaic, fragmented character of digital identity. For instance, drawing on a research of online communication practices of ethnic minority women, Kennedy 2006 refutes the idea that online identity is always anonymous and distorted: personal characteristics that are inherent in a person in reality find their continuation online, and people mostly prefer to tell the truth about themselves, rather than narrate a fictional story.

Having drawn this conclusion, one might be puzzled by the dilemma: given the latest facts on computer-mediated communication and the tendency of online and offline identities to converge, why would Internet users persist in choosing anything but their own photographic depiction for an avatar, let alone something monstrous? To be able to answer that question, one should look more closely at avatars and monsters, to find the thread that ties them to humans.

Monsters and avatars

The *Encyclopædia Britannica* 2013 presents monsters as "chaos beasts, lurking at the interstices of order, be they conceived as mythical creatures who preceded creation, survivals from an archaic era, creatures who dwell in dangerous lands remote from human habitation, or beings who appear in nightmares". This modern understanding of the term has moved away from its original, neutral, meaning and etymology, as is shown further in this paper, and implies the idea of something huge, hideous, threatening or inherently malignant, and alien to the natural design of the world. This understanding is akin to Plato's view on the beast, a scapegoat to blame for one's faults, opposed to all reason, as analysed by Mary Midgley in her *Beast and Man*:

Black horses, wolves, lions, hawks, asses, and pigs recur every time he mentions the subject of evil [...] His serious view is that evil is something alien to the soul; something Other, the debasing effect of matter seeping in through the instinctive nature. This treacherous element clearly cannot be anything properly human; it must be described in animal terms – and those of no particular animal at that, since all particular animals have their redeeming features, but a dreadful composite monster combining all the vices [...]. (Midgley 2004: 30)

Today the same meaning is ascribed to the monstrous. Even considering that the modern understanding of monstrosity has shifted from the original one, the present-day fauna of monsters is surprisingly extensive, ranging from traditional vampires, ghosts, werewolves, mermaids, dragons, and demons depicted by John Greer 2001, the author of a guide to the world of magical creatures, to less commonplace characters from Rory Storm's book on cryptozoology (Storm 2008), like the ogopogo, the sucuriju, the ucu, the tatzelwurm, the bunyip, the yowie, or the orang-pendek. Apart from fairy tales and bestiaries, the major residence of these legendary creatures today is the Internet where they can move easily across geographical, religious, political, economic, and cultural borders. It is hard to estimate correctly their presence in the virtual environment, but their habitat is huge: being used as avatars, their pictures are an inherent part of every online social networking service, not to mention specialized forums and online games (like Myth Wars, Dragon Days Legends, Days of Monsters etc.), where the monstrous is the cornerstone of communication. Thus the discussion leads us close to the concept of the avatar, familiar to every user of the Internet, but not fully discovered yet, as a social phenomenon, on the one hand, and an art object, on the other.

Turning to different definitions of avatar apart from the one mentioned above, the first or primary meaning relates to the incarnation (human or animal) of a Hindu deity on earth. Derived from Sanskrit *avatāra* ('descent'), it "literally means descent of a deity from his abode in suitable form for certain purpose" (Varadpande 2009: 39). So the term primarily stands for one of the epitomes of a god on a quest. This quest usually involves counteracting a particular evil in the world, for instance, fighting a tyrannical demon. Although any god, being formless, may have these appearances, more often the term is used to refer to ten basic incarnations of Vishnu: a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a dwarf, a lion-man, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalkin.

Another meaning of the word touches upon an embodiment of an idea, quality, or philosophy in a person, or some other incarnation in a human form. In modern life people embody concepts, whereas in mythology they personify gods who descend into this world; as well as in Hindu legends, examples might be found in myths of different peoples. Becoming an incarnation of the transcendental, embodying an idea, literally means providing one's body (Latin *carnis* – flesh) as a vessel for some formless substance.

Interestingly, Midgley 2004 mentions that in Ancient Greece people ascribed their intellectual blindness to being captured and moved by a god's will. Later on, they began to fault their beastly nature, at the moments when they could have been said to be turning into avatars (incarnations) of the Beast. Today the roles have changed: it is the human whose will stands behind the monstrous avatar, for today, incarnation is not the final stage of existence of ideas: human beings have found a way to mirror them back to the ideal world. Human demiurges have created a world of their own – the virtual world, a space where no physical entity can fit, but needs to be represented. People "descend"

there, often in the shape of monsters, to commit their deeds, to fight their own demons, in the form of signs, which became possible due to the mediational character of the Internet. The avatar is not just a picture; it is a sign, which will be specified further.

Avatars as signs

To gain a better understanding of the pragmatics of choice of representamen, and the relation between offline identity and its online counterpart manifested through avatars it is important to analyse the concept of the avatar from a semiotic perspective. The most fundamental division of signs involves distinguishing between icons, indices and symbols (CP 2.275). The first type implies certain resemblance to the object, the second – certain adjacency to it. Thus an icon resembles the object it represents, and can exist independently from it, whereas an index is organically tied to an object and would vanish without it. However, it does not necessarily need an interpretant, a certain forestructure in the receiving mind, and can be fixed *a posteriori*.

A symbol, on the other hand, is a conventional sign dependent on laws, habits or traditions of interpretation. For a symbol, this forestructure is essential: the link between the object and the sign must already be present in the mind of the other⁵, especially if this connection is associative, indirect, as, for example, in the case of the unicorn seen a symbol of chastity⁶. By pulling one corner of this triangle, the rest emerges; by mentioning the *sign* one appeals to its counterpart in the other's mind. Both are related to a certain *concept* that stands behind a single *object*. In the famous discussion of the unicorn between William and Adso in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, we learn that symbolically, the concept is not merely the platonic *eidos* of all unicorns, but is

⁵ In semiotics the other is indispensable as the bearer of the interpretant, an integral element of the basic semiotic relationship: "A Sign, or Representamen, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object. The triadic relation is genuine, that is its three members are bound together by it in a way that does not consist in any complexus of dyadic relations" (CP: 2.274).

As this triadic relationship cannot be reduced to any dyad, the figure of the other is essential. The sign does not only represent something (or someone, in the framework of this research), it necessarily does it to someone. Of course there might be extreme cases when the interpretant is formed in the consciousness of the subject who gave birth to the sign. It can be a mark drawn on a palm, or a thread wound around one's finger – serving as a reminder, a sign for oneself to do something.

⁶ Even if unicorns existed, chastity would contradict the natural order of things where mammals (to whom unicorns presumably belong) sexually reproduce; thus there can be no direct link between the creature (the representamen) and the concept behind it. This paradox might be a reason why unicorns no longer exist (and chastity is as rare a quality as its symbol).

inseparable from the idea of chastity, virtue, morality (Eco 1995: 316). If anyone picks this image as an avatar, it may be inferred that the person wishes to be associated with these qualities and uses this representamen to symbolize a part of his or her inner world. It must be admitted though, that a less sophisticated approach may prompt the thought that the user is merely tempted by the beauty of the image or is demonstrating his or her affection for the animal, in a totemistic way.

Does this simply mean, then, that an avatar is a symbol of the subject who picked it, on the premise that it stands for the person representing him or her on the net? Hardly. There is no uncertainty that an angel may be seen as a symbol (of purity, spirituality, hope, good intentions – depending on the context). But how would we class an avatar depicting an angel in case it has been selected simply in order to represent someone whose name is Angela? It cannot be regarded as a symbol as there is no tradition anchoring this representamen to this person or even this class of people (all women called Angela). The choice has been made single-handedly – or in some rare cases collectively if it stands for a virtual community, but then it lacks convention involving other communities or individual users.

It is unlikely that the avatar belongs to the class of indices either, since even in the person's absence on the net the sign remains;⁷ once uploaded there, it can lead a relatively independent existence, even if the user never opens the account again – this can be checked by reading the comments that some avatars provoke. Moreover, even if nobody ever opens this page to encounter this sign, it does not cease to exist on the net. Its presence may be regarded as indexical for it indicates the fact that the user was there, or that he or she got registered, but it is not its essential feature.⁸

Therefore, it can be argued that the connection between the subject and the avatar is to a great extent based on resemblance – external or internal. In discussing diagrams (a subdivision of the icon), Thomas Sebeok (2001: 107) stresses Peirce's thought that they do resemble objects, but not necessarily in looks, and the same might be said about the

⁷ Jacques Derrida (1982: 9) states that classically “[t]he sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present [...] The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence”. Though he puts forward his critique of this classic approach, it would be difficult to refute the statement that a web-image is doomed to substitute the subject, in temporal perspective, but even more so in terms of space. For the subject may be present in the web, but unless the web camera is on, the avatar has to represent him or her in a dimension where no human can be physically present.

⁸ Messaris (1997: 130–135) considers photography a case of Peircean indexicality as it is a physical trace of its referent, provided by photographic evidence. It is inferred that a picture can be naturally perceived as a truthful record of reality, whereas in fact it is just a case of visual deception achieved by the mechanisms of staging, editing, selection and computer manipulation – so a “truthful, human-like monster” as a substitute for the human. One can agree that it might be so when one talks about photography itself, and the image would be indexical, but it is not the case if it is used as an avatar. The procedure of being chosen on the user's volition changes its semiotic status.

avatar. Thus it can be called an iconic sign linked with its bearer directly (as in the case of photography, on the basis of external resemblance) or mediated by means of an idea (as in the case of a voluntarily made choice, for instance in order to be associated with angelic patience). At the same time this sign is linked with the interpretant – an image in the other’s mind; in juxtaposing this image with the representamen, cognition or recognition of the subject by the other takes place. It is in the hope of forming a certain image that a picture is chosen as a representamen. So an avatar can be considered an iconic sign in as much as it resembles the object and has a meaning ascribed to it both by the message sender and the recipient. It is neither a symbol, which would require an agreed convention as to its meaning, nor an index because although the avatar serves to tell us that someone was there, it can also have an independent existence.

Having established that the avatar is primarily an iconic sign, let us continue with our analysis with regard to the semantics, syntax and pragmatics that traditionally constitute the study of sign systems, for if we develop Thomas Sebeok’s (2001: 108) thought, contemplation of the icon may sooner or later bring us closer to solving such philosophical problems as the issue of identity and its relation to the other.⁹

Semantics of avatars

As far as semantics, or the study of meaning, is concerned, the virtual world of the Internet is a unique reconstruction of reality, for its signs seem to represent all kinds of things in the world, including people and their properties, such as emotions. Apart from verbal contents, visuals play an important part in this representation. The semantic potential of the visual language (or rather, languages, since there are distinct variations, for instance, in the language of road signs or finger language) makes it an efficient communication tool due to its ability to convey meaning in spheres where verbal signs might be ineffectual, for instance in the multilingual environment of online forums where not all participants in the conversation share the same language (English, Spanish, etc.). Meaning here is conveyed in the process of integrating percepts (impressions of objects received through the sensory systems) with concepts that already exist in the mind. These are the abovementioned forestructures or presuppositions that form the referential context of comprehension to help one to understand the message. It is the same process as juxtaposing the representamen with the interpretant. In order to be able to sustain communication mediated by these images, taking into consideration

⁹ The fourth branch mentioned by some authors is that of sygmatics “which concerns the true sign-object relationship” (Taysina 2013: 139); as regards our problem it helps us to find out whether a sign corresponds to the person it stands for in the web (who starts to play the role of the object in relation to this sign, merely in terms of semiotics).

the concepts that stand behind these signs, dialogue participants should ideally share a “repertoire”, a set of codes which embody common concepts that stand behind these signs. But this is not always the case as far as visual language is concerned, due to its highly polysemantic nature which leaves it open to multiple interpretations. While a dictionary may prove useful when it comes to words, little or virtually no reference material can help one to “read” a painting and to get exactly the same concept that its author had in mind while painting. The same holds true for showcasing and interpreting avatars. Such a dialogue would need an agreed set of conventions in order to convey meaning despite any individual and cultural differences that may stand in the way of this – conventions which avatar-mediated communication definitely lacks.

To illustrate these discrepancies, let us consider the serpent, representations of which have a long history and a wide range of cultural associations. It was believed to have a healing or protective nature in ancient Mesopotamia and India. We still see entwined snakes on the caduceus as the symbol of medicine. Being the staff of Hermes, this image dates back to Greek mythology where the snake was associated with wisdom and foresight. The Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, was connected with the Python – a chthonic creature, opposed to the heavenly gods – hence its ambivalence which is echoed in the biblical tradition that highlights its malevolent features. Given the almost universal fear of snakes, this is understandable; and yet it is striking that in many cultures the serpent is seen as beneficent, a protector and a healer, bound up, it seems, with the very foundation of the world and the dispenser of life, death and wisdom.

Other images which are used as iconic representations on the net, seem less equivocal. The phoenix and the ubume symbolize birth and rebirth, dragons stand for power and rage, sirens – for beauty and temptation... Some creatures, such as the centaur, epitomize internal conflicts, the unity and struggle of different elements; according to Greek legends, the centaur used to be a violent creature, because, in it, the human was mixed with the equine¹⁰. Others stand for the chaos of nature, like the grotesque Egyptian creature Amamet. For people who want to be associated with these concepts a picture of a monster bears a special semantic load, for it represents their identities, feelings, aspirations, hides their drawbacks, and helps to cope with their psychological complexes.

Apart from bearing a certain meaning (often contextual), a monstrous image is a structural phenomenon; consequently, it may undergo a further analysis, from the viewpoint of its morphology and syntax.

¹⁰ In his analysis of the identity of Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* Swinford (2012: 233) examines another dialectic – that of individual identity and social uniformity, a conflict between longing for harmony and reality; he draws parallels between Samsa's image and those creatures of the microcosmos showcased photographically in *Book of Monsters* by the American naturalist David Fairchild.

Morphology and syntax of the monstrous

In this study, morphology is concerned with identification of basic units in the image of the monster (that can be read or interpreted as a visual text). From this angle, every monster is just a synthesis of certain anatomical parts that are obtained analytically, an assemblage which is nothing more than rearranged bits of reality – everything that the world of nature can offer to the eye. To illustrate this, a mermaid is a creature with a female human torso and a fishtail. Substituting the wings and birds' legs for the tail will give us a harpy. Those elements can be matched in all possible combinations, resulting in numerous creatures, both known to humankind and new.

The spatial arrangement of these anatomical parts is related to syntax (Horn 1998: 8). Who would not know the children's game in which a player draws an element of a monstrous body on a piece of paper, then folds this bit of the image and passes the drawing on, so that in the end the company gets a bird and a reptile, a man and a woman, a mammal and a marsupial – all in one? A syntactic analysis of such a creature may help better understand its semantics bringing one close to the idea that the concepts that stand behind those parts, or elements, might not, in fact, contribute to the image of the whole. If we take wings, for instance, the idea behind this image seems clear: it is freedom, the ability to rise above the commonplace. It is what may seem an improvement for the human body, from the first sight. But, in combination with the feminine, wings will make a harpy, a creature referred to as one avid for blood and sexual pleasure (see, for example, Williams 1999: 257). In this case freedom and the ability to fly is given to the "evil" feminine spirit, and the positive connotations of wings turn the semantics of the whole image, namely the harpy, upside down. Perhaps the concept of monstrosity here is multiplied by that of femininity as examined by Simone de Beauvoir (1966), where woman herself is viewed as the other (*l'Autre*), different from Bakhtin's *čužoj*, in the sense of someone who is excluded from the archetype of humankind, derived from man and therefore in a sense lesser than him – certainly the other in the dualistic thinking of 'us-them', 'good-evil', 'men-gods' type.¹¹ It is actually the same binary opposition, the same relationship as might be traced between the god and the human, the human and the animal, or the monster.¹²

¹¹ It would be interesting to compare this thought to another feminist idea. Laura Mulvey (1975) argues that a woman is an object of voyeuristic pleasure, as opposed to the male subject who beholds her; this is the order of things in the modern patriarchal society, and the fact that women are involved in watching movies can be interpreted in the way that an alien, masculine, pleasure is actually imposed upon them. Thankfully, being open for people of every sex, age or race, avatar-mediated visibility has a potential for neutralizing such polarities.

¹² Another interesting observation concerning binary oppositions and visibility was made by Lupton and Miller (2000: 157) in their writings on graphic design. In particular, in their analysis of Derrida's ideas in relation to visibility and visual language, they unveil the opposition between high and low aesthetic forms. They come to the thought that high and low take turns in different contexts. What seems low in one setting may appear high in another.

Taking such a creature for one's representamen on the Internet is likely to bewilder both interlocutors and researchers. Exactly what is such a unity of opposites intended to convey? Considering the abovementioned tendency for convergence of the two identities, the online and the offline ones, the conclusion that one would be most likely to draw is that the person who chose such an avatar wants to be viewed as a monster. The possible reasons for that are discussed further.

Pragmatics of being seen

The issue of motivation is what stands behind the pragmatic choice; as far as the pragmatics of using monstrous images on the net is concerned, one makes one's choice with a view to accomplishing one's goals in dialogue in the best possible way. The first probable answer to the question "Why a monster?" may be simply related to the idea of catching the others' attention.

Greer begins his definition of monsters with a reference to Latin *monstrum*, originally meaning "a revelation, something shown forth" (Greer 2001: 3), thus tying this phenomenon to the concept of unveiling the unknown through its being shown (cf. another derivative – *demonstrated*). According to Greer, in ancient times the appearance of monstrous beings was treated as a message from other worlds, or "the hidden realms of existence" (Greer 2001: 4) and needed interpretation by wise men, such as omen readers. A monster was a sign for people to translate, whether of the good or the bad. This interpretation was primarily based on the mere ability to see, to discern this sign against the background of the mundane. As Parret (1994: 335) puts it in his analysis of synesthesia, "the very presence of things in the world is defined on the basis of their visibility"; in his opinion, vision is able to mediate between the real and the ideal; to see with one's eyes means to be "capable of seeing the essence of things" (Parret 1994: 335).

In the abovementioned overview of Vishnu's avatars the idea of the importance of imagery appears as salient: the icons of tribal gods were not rejected but assimilated in Vishnu's cult with the reservation that these were substitutes for the original depiction of the deity, used at his volition (Varadpande 2009: 173). Thus their non-classic appearance (which could be regarded as monstrous) still contributed to the glory of the supreme god. Williams's review of the monstrous is also abundant in such words as 'behold', 'show forth', 'appearance', 'invisible', 'image' and others in this or that way connected with visuality (Williams 1999). These numerous examples tie monstrosity to visuality: when the commonplace fails to grasp attention, the monstrous attracts like a puzzle that pleads to be solved.

In the view of Anna Wierzbicka (1999: 114), "being seen by other people" may be connected with embarrassment and the feeling of concern about one's image, when one does not want people to think about oneself in a certain key. The way we represent

ourselves using pictures speaks about the way we interpret our personalities and want to be seen by the other. But how can a deliberate distortion of one's human traits be interpreted in this respect? Williams 1999 writes about the superiority of the deformed image over the natural one. In this light the monstrous can be seen as culture surpassing nature, a more sophisticated symbolic layer overlapping the obvious phenomena found in the natural world. This leads us to another motif behind the sign choice.

Subjecting nature or returning to it

Williams argues that before the Middle Ages the existence of monsters was believed to be of magical character. According to Greer 2001, the Scientific Revolution brought about a shift in the human perception of monstrous revelations. Science rejected the idea of monstrosity, namely of the existence of mythical creatures in the world, leaving no place for its justification. Yet our yearning for mystery, for revealing the unknown, our belief in magic still push us to seek for the supernatural. Perhaps choosing a creature for an avatar is connected with a desire to enter the world of magic? Perhaps it is indicative of the human craving to subject nature to one's own purpose, to hone it to the edge of perfection, or even to overcome it?

Profoundly unsatisfied with nature, and the human body in particular, humanity is thus in constant search for perfection. Perhaps that was a motive for creating monsters in the virtual world. One does not necessarily have to be a master of the cinematographic art – it is enough to manipulate an image using photography editing tools to give shape and form, on the net, to our longing for monstrosity, and for the human to edge closer to the act of creation. Through becoming a monster a human acquires, symbolically, its superhuman powers, as extra limbs, an ability to fly, or an extended range of sensory perception.

At the same time, this act may manifest our returning to our roots, our desire to revert to nature. As was mentioned above, a monster is just a being with shuffled body parts, an animal. According to Reynaga who looks at creatures in Kafka's stories as vehicles of shame, as witnesses to people's estrangement from themselves and longings to regain their paradise lost, "animals are the extant representatives of man's primitive state, their bestial vitality having once been shared by his ancestors" (Reynaga 2012: 76). It can be deduced that the dialectic of this motivation is engendered by our alienation from nature, even though, according to Mary Midgley (2004), we are much closer to animals than we want to admit. Uncertain whether we agree to accept it, dare to surpass the beast in ourselves, or strive to snuggle up in Mother Nature's shade in search for help from the totem, we continue our experiments with the monstrous.

Past human experience of identifying oneself with some kind of creature was echoed in mediaeval festive practices as a survival of totemism, this period being an important landmark for establishing the human-monster relationship, its roots and modern interpretation, to which we now turn.

Wearing a mask or shedding one

Mediaeval monstrosity is closely linked to the concept of anatomical fantasizing, somewhat akin to the child's play with body parts mentioned above. In his analysis of Rabelaisian imagery Mikhail Bakhtin (1965: 374) derives these mediaeval grotesque concepts of the body from the legends of the so-called Indian miracles in anthologies like *Merveilles du Monde* or *Le roman d'Alexandre* that defined the motifs of fine arts in the Middle Ages. Along with real animals, like the panther or the elephant, these anthologies pay much attention to fantastic creatures such as dragons, gryphons, harpies, or lycorns, as well as monstrous humanly creatures. Some of them are mixtures of the human and the animal, like hyppopodes or cinocephales. Apart from those, there is a whole gallery of images of those bearing certain pathology (one-legged sciopodes, six-handed people, etc.). This grotesque fantasizing so popular in the Middle Ages and obvious in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* as well, was connected with peculiarities of mediaeval perception of the Earth which, according to Bakhtin, was close to the image of the human body. Different *trous* (holes) of the body were symbolic representations of terrestrial relief, and the human bottom stood for hell in this perception. Hence mixing body parts, matching human bodies with animal heads, wings or tails let one trespass the borders of the ordinary, and this bizarre fantasizing about the body enabled a mediaeval person to approach the forbidden, the taboo.

Avatar-mediated visibility is one means to this fantasizing which is still open for us today; therefore the Internet can be viewed as a peculiar kind of Bakhtinian *carnival* (coincidentally, as a space for *incarnations*), though for the modern mind, in effect a "second world and a second life" beyond the official (Bakhtin 1965: 8). It is as picturesque and mosaic as the carnival; and just as the carnival exists on the verge of art and life, so the Internet embraces the real and the virtual. The mediating character of computer communication enables us to switch on the logic of the topsy-turvy, inherent to the mediaeval carnival, and modify our social and demographic characteristics in exactly the same way, with the help of the digital disguise, or avatar.

Analysing gaming as the apogee of modern carnivalization makes it evident that the connection between the user and the avatar is not random at all. The avatar is the iconic sign communicated to the other in a game (or in the process of other computer related practices), a part of the human, betraying his or her monstrosity, chosen because of a desire to catch the other's eye, a longing for the lost primeval state, or another

motive. What is more important is that wearing this mask does not lead to juggling with identities in an attempt to cover the person's true self¹³. On the contrary, it allows for one's liberation from conventionalities and dogmatism, the same way as during a carnival the person underwent rebirth for truly humane relationships, managing to overcome the alienation engendered by the hierarchy of feudalism, by making contact with others irrespective of their position, rank or merits (Bakhtin 1965: 13). The same holds true for the online "carnival". While the user is logged on, disguise helps him or her to forget about the factors of alienation of the real life.¹⁴ It helps one to fully uncover the true nature of the human, extending beyond artificial boundaries of social classes (age, gender, position, income, education, etc.). A digital disguise here is just a means to surpass them, or, at least, to step aside from them, for a while, so that the person is not perceived as, say, the ethnic minority woman in her forties she "really" is, but as the serpent, wise and dangerous, she feels herself to be and wants to be perceived as.

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be made here is that in choosing a representamen the subject sets himself or herself free from restrictions and norms imposed from the outside. At the same time, the avatar should not be seen as a folding screen for psychological complexes; on the contrary, it is a masquerade outfit which when worn enables someone to release one's inner potential and thus to feel equal with the other, evading all prejudice and stereotypes.

¹³ In her study of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, Suellen Adams ponders over this seeming antinomy: "[a]lthough I considered it simply as a role to be played, I became aware that to a great extent, whether I intended it or not, whatever "role" I chose was going to become my outward "identity" to others within the game environment" (Adams 2005: 5). This is a paradox indeed: on the one hand, the avatar is used to conceal the identity, but on the other, "[i]t is obvious that behind every avatar is a human [...] The avatar and the human are inextricably linked, and it is possible that humans are exploring meanings by way of an assumed identity embodied by the avatar" (Adams 2005: 2).

¹⁴ Of course, depending on the society that uses the Internet, it can be viewed both as an instrument of social inclusion, and as a factor of alienation of the individual from real life. This same lack of control (for instance, on the part of a government) may have a negative influence on the formation of personality of a teenager or someone whose psyche can barely distinguish between the virtual and the real worlds. Not only may one bring a part of one's identity into the space of computer-mediated communication, but one may also spread virtuality outside the computer world. For instance, being accustomed to the option of "pushing the pause button" in playing a computer game, in order to continue the quest next time, or "resurrecting after dying", "using second, third life", one may lose the adequate perception of the time continuum in reality, up to the point of total devaluation of one's life.

The effort of explaining oneself to the other, even if the outcome is just a picture, makes sense. Any attempt to reveal oneself to the other leads, or at least contributes, to penetration to the essence, to the core. The mere intention to be seen by the other, even in the shape of a monster, will be a link between the image and the identity, between the subject and the other. Undoubtedly the dialogue may be successful here only on the condition of the other's full understanding of the fact that this image is not an accurate copy of the subject, but an embodiment of the subject's intention to be associated with this creature.¹⁵ Bearing that in mind, seeing a digital monster will mean seeing a person (or other subject) behind it, since someone put it forward as their representative in an effort to prove their presence, no matter whether it was a sincere communication effort, a hoax, or an escapade meant to provoke. Communicating with a monster in one's day-to-day communicative practices may give rise to attempts to find out what kind of soul is hiding behind this image, in all its uniqueness, in its longing for the transcendental or merely in its attempt to project itself onto the world and be seen.

The aim of this essay was to explore the phenomenon of choosing a monster as an avatar in computer-mediated communication, in order to discover possible factors of this choice and to find an answer to a question whether this image can be trusted as one's substitute in the virtual world. Hopefully, answering positively, it succeeded with this challenge, at least to some extent, as an initial exploration of monstrous avatars, and will open up a discussion to further analyse and elucidate the phenomenon of monstrosity as a form of representation of the human being in the virtual world.¹⁶

¹⁵ Let us consider the point derived from Kant's theorization that the logical world restricts our mind so that we are able only to comprehend occurrences according to their appearances: "although phenomena are properly the appearances of things, but not ideas, or express the inner and absolute quality of objects, their cognition is nevertheless of the truest. For in the first place, being apprehended sensual concepts, they, being consequences, witness the presence of the object [...] and hence give occasion for perfectly true cognition" (Kant 1894: 56). Visual images being phenomenal are just resemblances of things, but can be trusted like any other representation. Any intentional visual deception in representation is justified as long as one represents oneself – on the premise that he or she is the closest one to the truth of things about him- or herself and is the only one who is able to judge which of his qualities are the primary and which the secondary.

¹⁶ I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable help in writing this paper: Vadim Rudnev in whose books Alice found the entrance to Wonderland; my teacher Emiliya Taysina for her inspiring lectures on semiotics; my friend John Broadbent for being the first gracious critic of the manuscript.

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Виртуальные мифические существа: репрезентация человека в Интернете

В статье рассматривается использование изображений мифических существ в качестве саморепрезентации в Интернете. Связывая воедино понятия репрезентации, визуальности, монструозности, образа и идентичности, автор пытается обнаружить мотив, побуждающий пользователей выбирать подобный аватар. Цель этого исследования – открыть дискуссию для дальнейшего анализа использования изображения мифических существ в виртуальной реальности с точки зрения семиотики. Выбор аватара устанавливает связь между образом и идентичностью, поскольку волей человеческого разума он выступает представителем того, кто пытается доказать свое присутствие другим, движимый интенцией раскрыться, стать видимым в том или ином свете. Компьютерно-опосредованная коммуникация с помощью этого знака сродни средневековому карнавалу: маскарадный наряд здесь заменяет знаковый щит, позволяющий пользователю преодолеть догматизм и отчуждение, порожденное иерархичностью общества, предоставляющий возможность контактировать с людьми всех чинов и сословий, возвращающий человеку свободу.

Digikoletised: inimeste representeerimisest internetis

Artiklis vaadeldakse koletiste kujutisi kui eneseesitlusvõimalust internetis ning püütakse jõuda selgusele, mis võib peituda sellise avatarivaliku taga. Püütakse siduda representatsiooni, visuaalsuse ja koletislikkuse mõisteid, nii et avatar jääb kuvandite ja identiteede lõikumiskohta. Eesmärgiks on algatada diskussiooni analüüsima ja valgustamaks koletislikkuse fenomeni semiootilisest perspektiivist, nimelt inimese esitlemisvõimalusena virtuaalmaailmas. Koletise ikooni valimine avatariks loob seose kuvandi ja identiteedi vahel, sest teatud mõistuse tahe on pannud selle ennast esindama, püüdes tõestada teistele oma kohalviibimist kavatsusega saada nähtud mingil kindlal viisil. Selle märgi edasiandmine internetis on suguluses keskaegse karnevaliga, kus märgikilp kujutab maskeraadikostüümi, võimaldades saada üle ühiskondliku hierarhia põhjustatud dogmaatilisusest ja võõrandumisest, muutes võimalikuks kontakti kõigist seisustest, igasuguste positsioonide ja tiitlitega inimestega, lubades vabanemist.