**Title:** Use Some Body: Embodiment and morality in virtual worlds

**Abstract:** This paper examines if and how ‘embodiment’ can be extended to virtual worlds. I begin by rejecting the common view that embodiment must be real, and so one cannot be embodied in non-real virtual worlds (Gallagher 2005; Himmelreich 2016; Meijsing 2006). Instead, I agree with Anna Gotlib (2014) and Jessica Wolfendale (2009) that virtual embodiment is possible, and that we can use virtual embodiment to understand how agency and morality might extend to virtual worlds. Gotlib and Wolfendale use their research within the online game *Second Life* to make the following two claims:

1. Real-life players can be virtually embodied via their avatar when they strongly identify with their avatar and view it as a central part of their narrative identity.
2. This ‘avatar identification’ form of virtual embodiment can be used to develop a consequentialist form of virtual morality. It is because players identify with their avatars that virtual actions can be morally assessable.

Whilst this is a good start to the discussion on virtual embodiment and does apply in *some* cases, I argue that the above is both overly strong and overly restrictive. It is overly strong as it makes embodiment dependent upon narrative identity and identification; neither of which are necessary conditions of real-world embodiment. It is overly restrictive because it i) would make virtual embodiment very rare, ii) only considers virtual embodiment within virtual games, and iii) entails that virtual actions are wrong iff they have negative real-world consequences. In response, this paper will present a more general, wide-reaching notion of ‘virtual embodiment’ that can better explain how agency and morality extend to new virtual environments.

To develop this new view, I draw on Marcus Johansson’s (2009) discussion of virtual agency. In essence, Johansson argues that to morally evaluate the behaviour of an agent, we need to examine *all* of their actions and intentions. When actions take place in virtual settings, we should consider the virtual avatar and the real-life player as constituting one morally relevant person/agent. I argue that this idea can be developed into a view of virtual embodiment that does not depend upon avatar identification. *Namely, we are virtually embodied any time that we use our virtual selves to perform virtual actions, have experiences, etc.* My new view allows us to do two things. First, extend virtual embodiment beyond virtual games to consider *any* virtual environment where a real person is doing virtual actions (e.g. social media, chatrooms, etc.) Second, allow for non-consequentialist forms of virtual morality. If we accept that people are *always* virtually embodied when performing virtual actions (as the above suggests), then real people are always *present* in virtual worlds. I argue that this allows us to see avatars and virtual persons as *ends* who can be benefited or exploited. From this we could develop a *deontological* form of virtual morality which acknowledges how we can interact with, treat, and/or use others in the virtual world.

**(Abstract word count: 486/500 words).**

**Keywords:** Virtual embodiment, agency, morality.

**Reference List:**

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**Short Biography:** Helen is a Midlands4Cities-funded PhD student at the University of Birmingham. Her thesis examines the problem of marginal cases of human rights, and she aims to develop a new non-binary personhood theory which would allow us to grant marginal cases (children, animals, robots, etc.) some degree of personhood and some human rights. She is supervised by Dr Jussi Suikkanen, Dr Jeremy Williams, and Professor Heather Widdows. Helen also has interests in assessing how personhood, ethics, and moral and legal philosophy can extend to new technologies, and she has examined this in relation to video games and artificial intelligence (A.I.).