Altaholics Anonymous: On the Pathological Proliferation of Parasites in Massively Multiple Online Worlds

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Abstract: *In insider discussions of Massively Multiple Online Games, the recent proliferation of supernumerary avatars ("alts" for "alternate characters") in online environments has been given a playful pathological diagnosis: 'altaholism' is a playful term for someone who can not focus on just one character in an online game, usually known as their main, and who grows an often large inventory of alts or alternate characters. Alts are explorers of systems: they can play as many roles or perform as many functions as the game systema nd game world affords. While "alts" are attested from the very beginnings of online games, older alts often represent "alternate personas", affording forms of escape from the singular identity of the main character. Contemporary alts, by contrast, often play alongside the main character: here alt often takes on a range of subservient functions in relation to the main character. But alts also proliferate in the ecosystem of affordances provided by the system that they inhabit and feed upon, so that it is impossible to define in advance what the possible range of functions an alt may fulfil is in relation to a main character. That is, an alt exists partly as a parasitic relationship to a relationship of identity between a player and a 'main character'. Like the parasite following Paul Kockelman's recent discussion (2010), the alt is a "really a joker, or wild card, who takes on different values depending on its position in a system." Debates about the proliferation of alts, including humorous diagnoses such as "altaholism" and actual attempts to ferret them out, and the role of third party softwares in mediating this transition (multiboxing to multibotting), reveal differing ideologies about when an alt moves from being a human to a non-human actor ("bot"), and when an alt becomes a parasite of a legitimate game world "host".*

Keywords: alt, alts, altaholism, altaholic, parasites, MMO, gaming, RPG, Ryzom, pathology, City of Heroes, roleplaying

Figure 1. Mecha Mouse in Atlas Park, City of Heroes

"Hello, my name is Mecha Mouse, And I am an altaholic...."

In forums devoted to online Massively Multiple Online (MMO) gaming, this opening line is immediately recognizable as referencing the jocular gaming pseudo-pathology known known as "altaholism" (also known as "altoholism" and "altitus"). Roughly, altaholism occurs when a player becomes addicted to making new alternate characters or "alts", so much so that they spend more time creating alts than "leveling up" (improving) their "main character". In at least one (now defunct) online world, City of Heroes, I was indeed an altaholic with more than 90 alts. In fact, at least one of my alts was a member of a player guild with the name "Altaholics Anonymous", a joke guild that probably exists in every server on every MMO.

In this essay I want to use this jocular pathology, altaholism, as a lens through which to study these quasi-human characters, alts, which have developed as an emergent, unplanned, property of online worlds. As I will show, in many respects the proliferation of these supernumerary avatars parallels player-made modifications of the game, what are called "mods" (on which see Taylor 2009, Nardi 2010: 143-151). In some worlds, such as the world of Atys of the game Ryzom, alts and altaholism have become so common and pervasive as to become a normal condition, so that altaholism is no longer a property of individual pathology (because virtually every player has at least one alt), but a pathology of the world as a whole. Using ethnographic material from Ryzom, I want to show is that alts, as a third term in addition to the player and the main character, disrupt and complicate the ontological categories of online worlds, categories like identity, humanity and agency. These categories are normally relayed by main character avatars (which usually stand in a one to one relation to an active controlling player) in a manner that erases or "blackboxes" the mediating role of the avatar, so that the nonhuman avatar is, except in situations of "lag" (latency) or "afkness" (Boellstorff 2008: 101-112), usually seen as a transparent intermediary between the offline human and the online world. Alts, by adding a third term, another avatar beyond the obligatory main character, highlight, defamiliarize, foreground or "make strange" the normally invisible, "seen but unnoticed" mediation of the avatar: The avatar moves from being a passive

invisible intermediary to an active, highly visible, mediator (in the sense of Latour 2005). So alternate avatars, as they proliferate, raise ontological questions of self-identity ("Which of these avatars is me?"), the humanity of other avatars ("Which of these avatars is human?"), and the distributed agency of groups of avatars ("How are all these avatars being controlled by a single human?"). Three brief ethnographic sketches from Ryzom serve to give a concrete idea of the confusions and questions that arise:

> I am standing in the plains of Winds of Muse, north of the lake, surveying the terrain for a spawn of dehydrated stringas, an intelligent plant that I am currently grinding with my two-handed sword. I've been alone for hours, not a homin (homin is the local word for humanoid, and also "player character") in sight. I like the feeling of isolation in places like this, just me and the animals on the windswept waste. Suddenly, a homin I don't know, Mianna, mounted on a Mektoub (Figure 12), a sort of elephant-like creature, rides by with two Mektoub packers who are set to follow her. A little eye over her avatar indicates that she is looking at me as she passes. She waves at me, and I cheer her on as she passes into the distance.

> I am standing near the Karavan Teleport station at Pyr, waiting for a band of Leviers, an enemy NPC tribe, to pass, who I will ambush whenever they appear. In the distance, on the other side of a small gorge, I see Likana, a homin I recognize but do not know, running off into the desert trailed by comet tail of avatars, none of whom I recognize but who are probably her alts who have been set to follow her. I recognize Likana, but I would know she is the main character because she is leading and dragging her alts behind her. I cheer her on, and she waves back as she disappears into the distance. I do not greet her alts any more than I greet Mianna's mektoub packers, nor do they greet me.

> I am standing at the Kami teleport near Knot of Dementia. I've been hunting Armas, a social herd animal that in this season seems to be plentiful in that area, and Timari, an exceptionally stupid non-social creature which looks like a stegosaur with a hammerhead that likes to hang around with Armas. Waiting for a fresh spawn, I notice a small group of homins standing at the teleport, none of whom I recognize. I greet them each, but they do not reply, or make any other movement other than the stationary "waiting" animations that all creatures make, so I assume they are AFK (that is, the player who controls them is away from the keyboard). Only later does it occur to me that this is a group of alts who have been deposited in a safe spot until their main character needs them.

The connection (or non-connection) of player to avatar embodied in the main character "blackboxes" the relation as an unproblematic one of "identity". The various ways that alts as parasites pluralize this relation opens up this black box in potentially infinite ways. I have called the relationship between the player and the main character a semiotic *intermediary*, where the avatar serves as a passive, backgrounded, seen-but-unnoticed relay of the player's presence in the world, and the relationship of the alt to this relationship a *mediator*. Here I am explicitly using this terminology to recall a semiotic distinction made by Latour:

> An *intermediary*, in my vocabulary, is what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs. For all practical purposes, an intermediary can be taken as a black box, but also a black box counting for

> one, even if it is internally made up of many parts. *Mediators*, on the other hand, cannot be counted as just one; they might count for one, for nothing, for several, or for infinity. Their input is never a good predictor of their output....Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. [Latour 2005: 39]

Following a similar move made by Paul Kockelman (Kockelman 2010: 413), I want to suggest in this paper that insofar as alts foreground the normally latent nonhuman "otherness" of avatars, and disrupt the "normal" intermediary relation of passive relay ("presence", "identity", "immersion") between the player and the world, alts act as mediators. The pathology of altaholism produces an analytic vocabulary for rethinking the very relations that it is parasitic upon and that it pathologizes. I do this by suggesting various ways, drawing explicitly on Michel Serres' *The Parasite* (1982), that the alt acts semiotically as a third term, a joker, a wild card, a parasite, a mediator. Like a parasite, the alt's appearance is always treated as a pathology of whatever set of relations it colonizes, but like a parasite, it sometimes enters into complex symbiotic relations with the host.

Alts, Altaholism and Alterity

Like many true altaholics, I chose the durable name of my "main character" (*Mecha Mouse*, Figure 1) randomly from a list of 20 or so alts that have been my "main" at one point or another. I actually had to think about it. One variation of the "altaholism meme" draws attention to this advanced state of the addiction, where the player cannot even decide which of their pseudonymous alternate identities will serve as their main character, the pseudonym they use to introduce themselves to the other altaholics: "*Hi, my name* is Northman, and I am *an Altoholic*. No wait, *I'm* Lost Nova, no wait, Arc Havoc, no, Dragon Moon, no, Lord ..." (Northman 2012). Forum discussions of this pathology can range from joking role-playing enactments of addiction ("Fourteen [alts]? Oh, that is just a gateway quantity. Some of us are all rubbing alts on our gums and injecting them and sh*t... (sigh, 63...)" (Bogenbroom 2012), to rationalization in terms of why it is difficult to make one character the "main" (Scalawags 2011), to explanations grounded in the attractions of the alts ("I always have new ideas for characters and i have to bring them to life" (Daffy67 2011)).
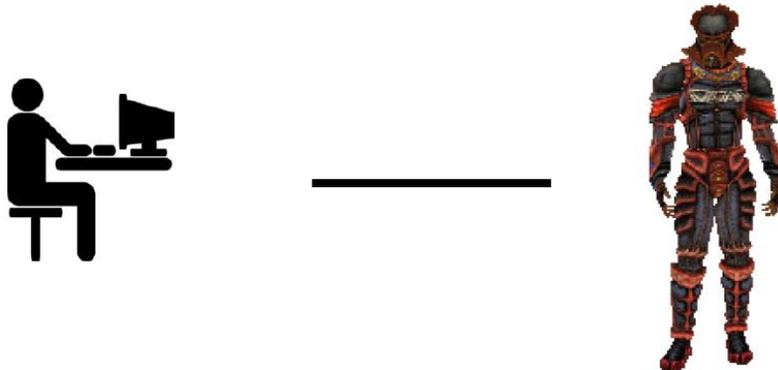

Figure 2. Player and Main Character: One to One Relation of Player to Avatar

First, to quickly recap what sort of thing the alt is. Players in online worlds embody themselves in those worlds through different "avatars" or "toons" (digital embodiments) which have durable names, appearances and identities (hence these are also called "characters" or "player characters"). Typically any given player will have a single avatar identity which they use most often and identify with or simply like the most, which usually called the "main character", or simply "main" (Figure 2). As Boellstorff (2008: 133) points out, an alt, short for "alternate" avatar or character, is defined first and foremost in relationship to the main character: if the relation of player to main character represents a dyadic relationship, the relation of alt introduces a third to turn this dyadic relationship into a ternary one (Figure 3). In the case of advanced altaholism, alts proliferate so much that the question of which is the "main" and which is an "alt" might become meaningless (Figure 4).
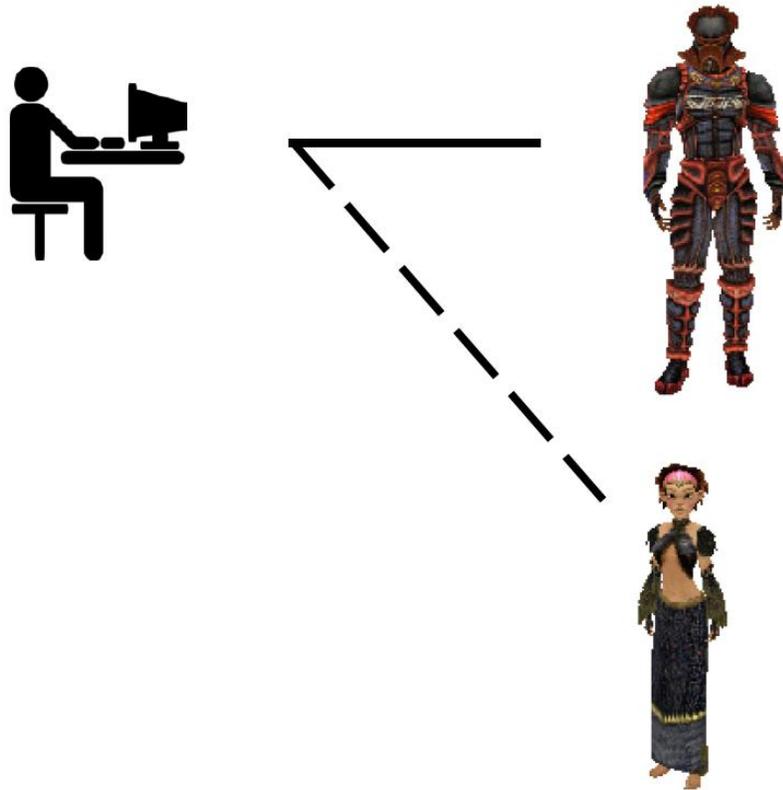

Figure 3. Alt: Any character in addition to main character (one to many relation)

In the online world I will draw most of my ethnographic examples from, the world of Atys in the game Ryzom, it is normal for any given player to have at least a few alts as well as a main. Here, as elsewhere in virtual worlds, the main character will generally provide the player with a stable anchor of identity in the online world, and often the player will be known by the name of whatever character is their main character, even if they are currently playing an alt. In much the same way, the identity of alts is parasitic on the main character they belong to (player pseudonyms have been altered but the chat is reproduced exactly as it appeared originally):

> **Kippy says:**   erm... whos alt is altister?
> **Kippy says:**   im kinda needing a rez right next to him :P
> **Rohan says:**   nandutu's alt

Questions about alt identity are like kinship diagrams which connect unknown alts to known main characters: questions of alt identity are not "*who?*" but "*whose?*" In Ryzom, knowing who is a real player character and who is an alt, and whose alt, is an important aspect of inworld knowledge. The classification of player characters as mains and alts is not left to simple inference, it is actively managed by players: Alts, for example, might be kept in separate "alt guilds", perhaps with suggestive names ("Alt Army"), all of whose members are alts, or they might have names that somehow clearly point to their "kinship" with a main character or their status as alts, alts do not in general speak except playfully, nor are they spoken to, and they are spoken of in the third person. These classification systems are not perfect: confusion might arise, then, if an alt is kept in a main character guild, as sometimes happens. Thus when Shadowblade (Moongleam's alt) logged in to the guild channel and received greetings, the greeters were playfully upbraided as "noobs" (clueless newbies) for inappropriately greeting an alt (Shadowblade), where it would have been normal to address the main character (Moongleam):

> [Shadowblade has logged in]
> **Pilette says:**   Heya Shadow
> **Kandaca says:** hi shadowblade
> **Yubo says:**   Hello Shadowblade!
> **Amicus says:** you guys
> **Amicus says:** :P
> **Amicus says:** Shadowblade - Moongleam
> **Amicus says:** noobs :P
> **Pilette says:**   rofl
> **Pilette says:**   Thats why i dont like alts in guild!!

As a first approximation, the main character, the online self, is what we have called elsewhere a "figure of identity", since its semiotics seem to be largely informed by notions of performing identity, while the alt, the online other, is a "figure of alterity" whose semiotics are defined in the first instance in opposition to the figure of identity (Hastings and Manning 2004). The kind of alterity involved varies. So, for example, Boellstorff describes pseudonymous "social alts" which are "used to embody an alternative selfhood", and more anonymous "escape alts" which allow the player to escape from inworld social networks (Boellstorff 2008: 132). In Ryzom, for example, a player [Lerrine] who was searching for another player [Shus], announced their suspicion that the player was "hiding in his alts":

> **Lerrine says:**   i have words with Shus and its not good but he is hiding in his many alts
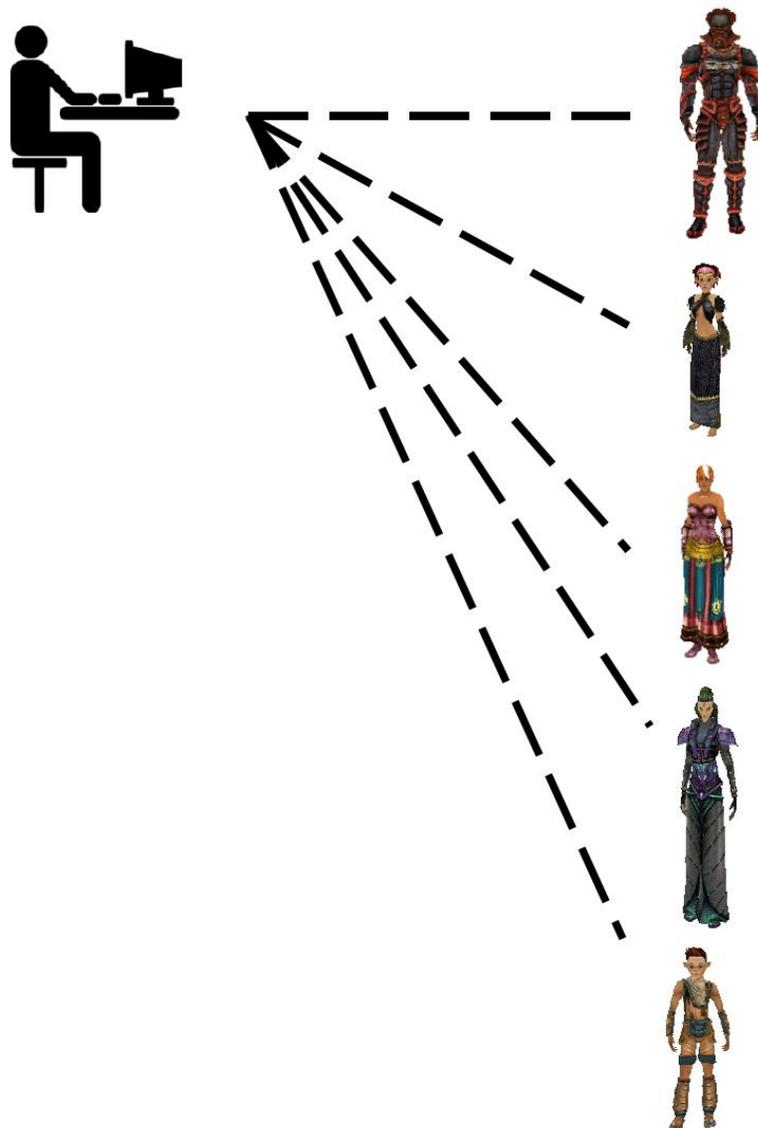
Figure 4. Altaholism: pathological proliferation of alts (alterity), absence of main character relation (identity).

But an alt can represent an even more extreme alterity: instead of "an other person", the alt is "the *other* of a person" (Vernant 1991: 111). According to Boellstorff, "social alts" are "the most common kind of alt" in *Second Life*, an other persona one plays instead of one's main character (Boellstorff 2008: 132). However, for most Ryzom players, the most common kind of alt is a distinctly asocial non-persona: a silent entourage of one or many alt servants that follow or wait upon the main character. While social alts can be on the same account, so that logging on an alt requires logging off the main character, these alts are on separate accounts and can be logged in simultaneously with the main character. This practice of running two or more alts simultaneously is called "dual-boxing" or more commonly "multi-boxing" (also "multiboxing"), because it requires multiple game accounts, and running multiple game clients simultaneously, which may require more than one computer ("box") (Figures 5 and 6). For Ryzom users, such alts made simultaneously present by multiboxing have become by now the standard default form of alt, so that some players cannot imagine any other kind:

> **nandutu says:** whats the point of having an alt if you can't play it at the same time?
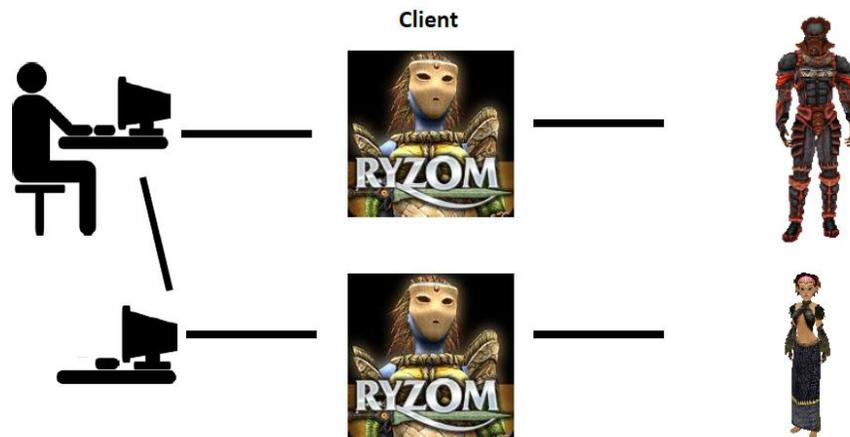

Figure 5. "Dual-boxing" or "multi-boxing" (first variant): the use of two (or more) computers (boxes) and two game clients to control two (or more) characters simultaneously.
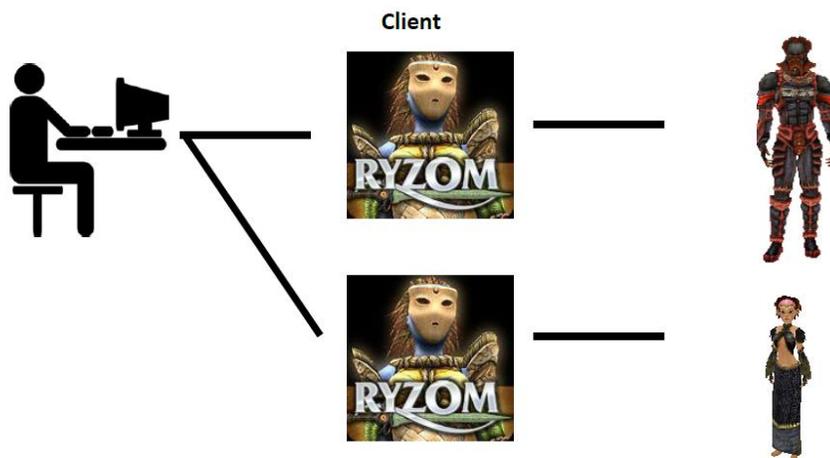

Figure 6. "Dual-boxing" or "multi-boxing" (second variant): the use of two (or more) game clients on one computer to control two (or more) characters simultaneously.

While when one is "hiding in one's alts", using an alt as a "social" alt, the alt might speak and otherwise enact an *other* persona (a performance of identity), but these multiboxed alts are normally silent. More importantly, they are carefully and systematically, and not simply incidentally, treated as non-persons. They perform "non-identity". This is an important point, unlike normal "non-player characters" (NPCs), who only resemble player avatars at a distance, up close there is absolutely no way of knowing which player-created avatars one sees are "player characters" (controlled by a player) and which are "alts" (controlled indirectly by a player) and which are "bots" (automata controlled by scripted commands or macros) (Figure 7). In addition, if the channel

breaks down between player and avatar, such as when a player wanders away from the keyboard ("Afk") or there is a great deal of "lag" or "latency", both main characters and alts look exactly alike, both are "ghostly absent presences" (Boellstorff 2008: 117). Since all player avatars are equally nonhuman, the humanity of the main character and the nonhumanity of the alt is not left to chance to be inferred, but actively managed and policed, and maintaining the distinction is both a technical and normative matter.
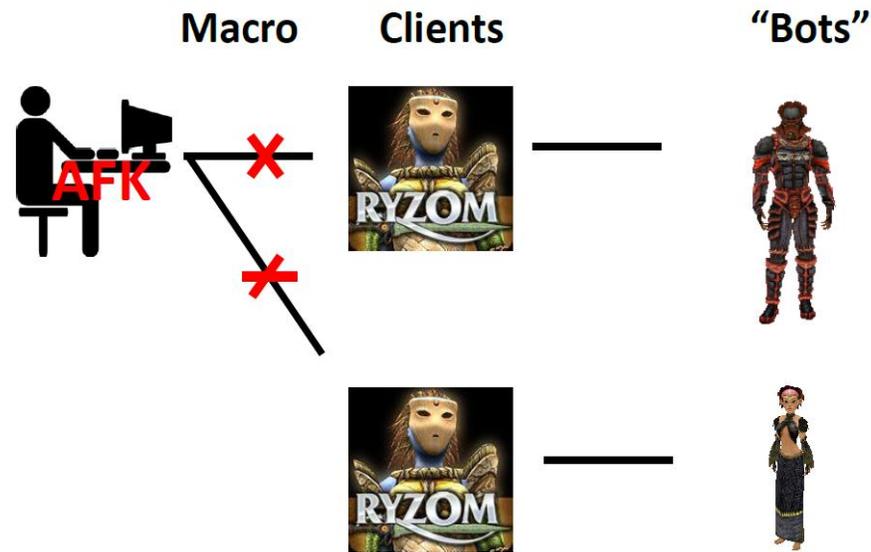

Figure 7. Bots and "Botting": Player avatars automated by macros or scripts while the player is away from the keyboard (AFK)

The alt begins as a figure of alterity to the figure of identity of the main character, but as these alterities multiply, the alt quickly becomes a wild card, a joker. As my choice of words here suggests, the semiotic figure of the alt invites comparison to Michel Serres' treatment of the semiotic figure of "the parasite" (which he also calls the third, the joker, the wild card) as a "relation with the relation [here, between player and main character] and not with the station [either the player or the main character]" (Serres 1982: 33) (Figure 8).
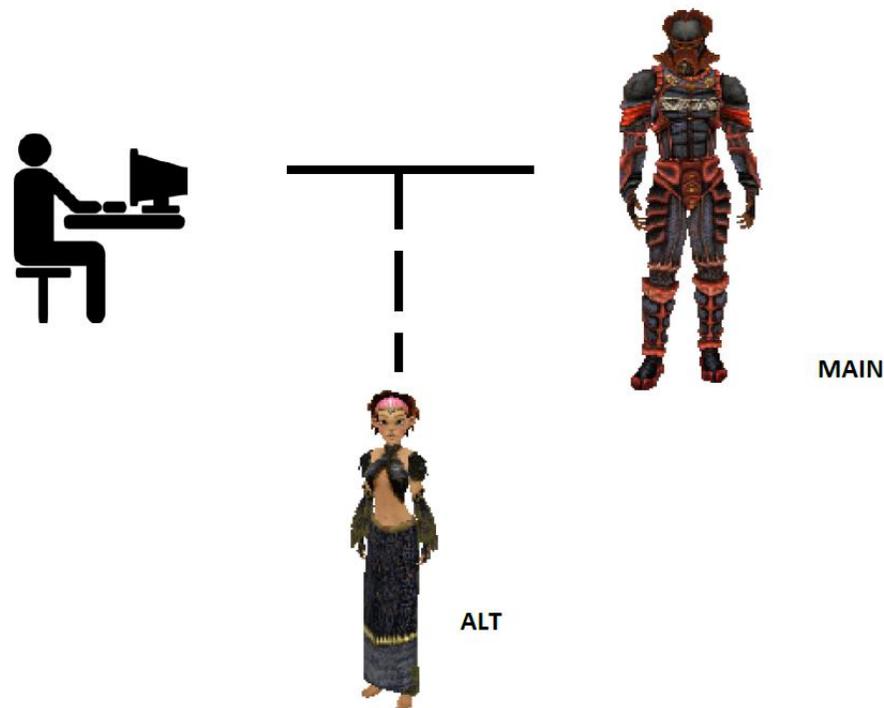
Figure 8. Alt as Parasite: "A relation with a relation and not a station".

There is no single answer to what makes a main character a main except that the player regards that character as their main, presumably playing it more often, identifying with that character or wanting to bring that character to the highest level. A character can move from being an alt to a main, and vice versa (so that, as Taylor notes (1999:448 n.3), the characters a player regards as equally "main characters" may end up being a "core group of selves and bodies").

There is equally no single answer to why people make alts (see Boellstorff (2008:128-134) for an excellent discussion of the various functions of alts in one virtual world). Importantly, not all alts are created as part of performances of identity, however elastic that notion might become, but to explore alternate ways of being in the world and acting on the online world: it may be to relive low-level playing experienced and areas and challenges one has outleveled; it may be to experiment with new costumes or skill combinations or builds; it may be that a player has a new idea for a character persona for role-playing; or it may be that the player simply needs more "closets" to store things in. As one confessed altaholic explains:

> An "altaholic" is a player who enjoys their game so much, that they create multiple characters in the world to explore all different avenues of gameplay. The reasons of course are varied. Perhaps some folks are just not happy with their first character, perhaps the game has different races and stories to choose from, or perhaps they like to roleplay and have created multiple characters to do so with. [Drewciferianisms 2011]

From the perspective of such an altaholic, alts are not only alternate personas to explore alternate, aspirational or playful identities ("social alts"), but are alternate vehicles for exploring the varied

affordances of the online world (a usage particularly typical of "multi-boxing"). Simultaneous alt usage ("multi-boxing") raises issues of avatar control and agency in a way that a "social alt" does not. On the one hand, controlling even two avatars at the same time ("dual-boxing") is difficult and requires canny and skilled use of the existing affordances of the user interface, on the other hand, controlling an army of multiple avatars simultaneously ("multi-boxing") greatly magnifies the individual player's causal agency in the world, even as it magnifies problems of control. However, having multiple avatar embodiments at the same time also raises questions that are less about identity and more about humanity: which of these avatars is "human" (a "real player" character, called a "homin" in local Ryzom terms) and which of these is an alt, and if so, whose.

>As dual-boxing morphs into multi-boxing, questions about the humanity of alts becomes more oriented to technical questions of agency rather than social questions of identity or even humanity: *how?* rather than *who? whose?* or *what?* In order to run an "alt army" successfully, Ryzom players resorted to external third party "key-sync" softwares (similar to player-made modifications or "mods") that allowed different game clients (instances of the game program, each character requires a separate account and requires running separate game clients) to be synchronized so that one keystroke or mouse movement was propagated to a series of different game clients and therefore synchronizing different alts. In this situation, the animation of the alts becomes literally *parasitic* on the actions of the main character, but each individual keystroke can be mapped to different *kinds of actions* using custom keymapping and macros (bundled commands mapped to a single key), so that a single keystroke makes one avatar melee attack, and another dispense a magical spell, and so on (Figure 9). An example of such synchronized alts (dancing, which is not an EULA offense!) can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7qqF76FEek (about 1 minute into the video).
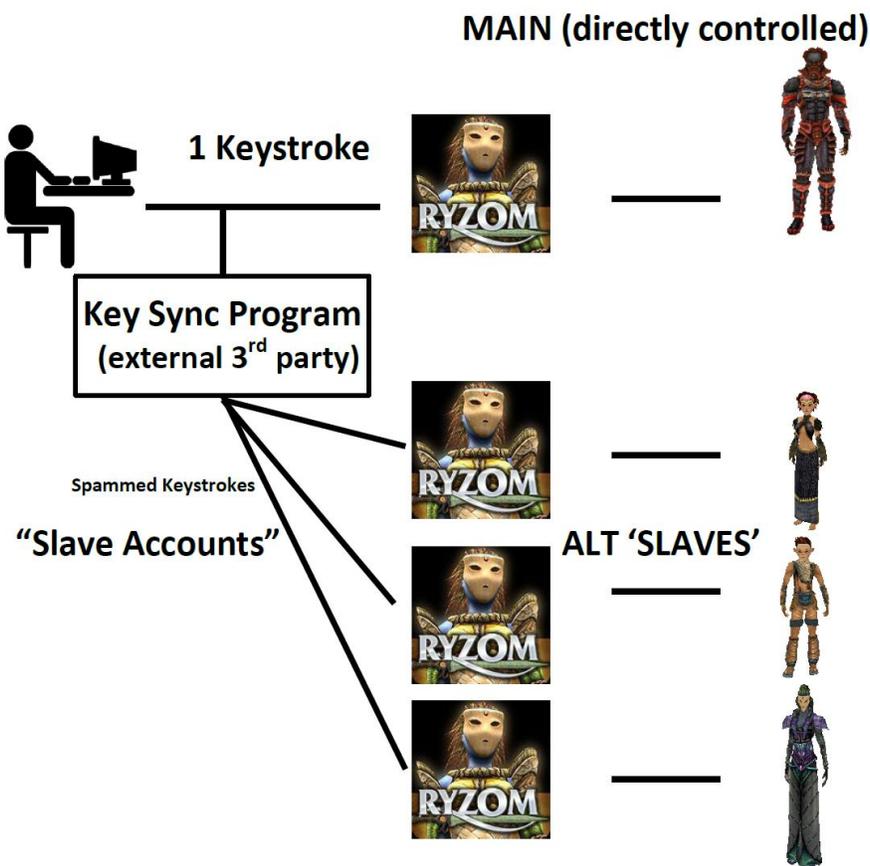
Figure 9. "Multi-syncing" or "artificially synchronized hominoids: third party program spams single keystrokes across multiple clients/avatars.

Attempting to conceptualize the kind of distributed agency here, some players called this version of multi-boxing "multi-syncing", others called these synchronized alts "artificially synchronized hominoids", while others treated them as "bots" ("botting"), a bannable offense according to the End User License Agreement (EULA). Just as players who innovated the practice explored the potentials of the user interface in order to let them better explore the world, these innovations occasioned other players to ask increasingly metaphysical questions about when and where human agency began and ended, where exactly did an alt cease to be a "homin" and become a "bot" (Figure 10). As I have noted, this question is always relevant to all avatars, but is normally latent in the player's relation to a main character avatar, in the manner of all "blackboxed" relations it only resurfaces when the channel between the player and the avatar breaks down, in cases of lag, latency, or afkness (Boellstorff 2008: 106-117). However, as alts proliferate, they cannot help but occasion reflection on the precarious ontology of "presence", "immersion" and "identity" the main character or player character embodies in relation to the world.
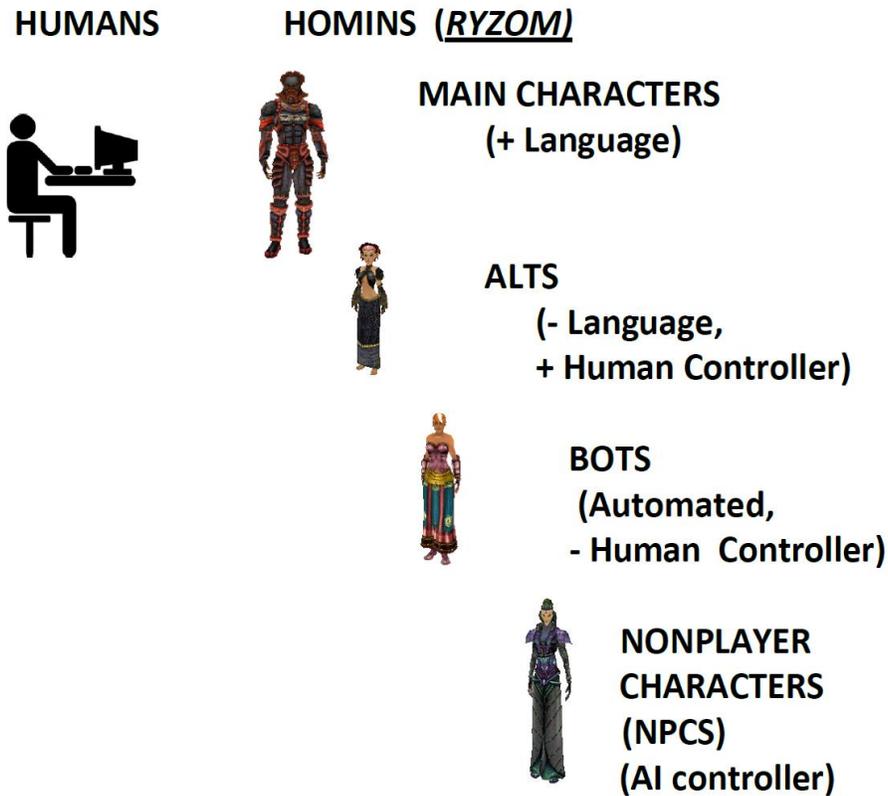
Figure 10. Degrees of "hominity": Alts and bots complicate the dualist ontology of "homins" (player characters) and "NPCs"(Non-player characters).

If multiple alts allow a single player to better explore the world, then controlling this army of alts in turn requires that the player also explore the user interface of the game, and this exploration in turn required the other players and developers to assess the changes brought on by the proliferation of alts, and ultimately this practice of "multi-syncing" was banned from Ryzom (a topic I discuss in more ethnographic detail elsewhere). In all these cases, alts move from explorers of player identity, to explorers of worlds, to explorers of the normally invisible interface between the player and the world.

So there is no single story one can tell about "why people make alts" and "why they become altaholics", but there is something all these different kinds of alts, all these different forms of althaholism, share, which is their emergent or explorative quality. Alts are a kind of affordance of online worlds that no designer seems to have planned, that no science fiction writer seems to have prophesied: they are truly "emergent" creatures indigenous to the ecology of affordances of the medium itself. They are used to explore that medium, and so give us a privileged way to explore the medium analytically. And since they explore and colonize the particularities and potentialities of each particular interface and each particular world, what alts share is a buzzing profusion of functions that each, in their ways, reveal the particularities of each game world.

Like Serres' parasite, the alt is a "really a joker, or wild card, who takes on different values depending on its position in a system" (Kockelman 2010: 412). As Serres notes, the parasite is "the simplest and the most general operator on the variability of systems" (1982: 191). The alt, as a kind of parasite, is thus an extremely general condition, but alts also share with parasites the attribute of

specificity (1982:195, 230): all individual alts are specialists, since they are operators on variability itself. Since the alt explores niches in the gaming ecosystem, there is no way, even in principle, to account for all the values an alt may have across all gaming worlds and all interfaces. Since storage capacity is a perennial problem in many online games, there are alts whose sole purpose is to store goods, called "banking" and "storage alts" (for example, Boellstorff 2008: 132). In the (now defunct) superhero world City of Heroes, for example, unlike most worlds, avatar costumes are not tied to character powers, and the costume system is quite elaborate, and costume contests were a common event, so a large amount of the altaholism in that world is tied to creating new characters with combinations of name, costume, powers and back story. My altaholism in that world is explained by my desire to explore these affordances for character creation.

The alt begins as a third term, simply an alternate online embodiment, an alternate relation to the same station (the player) (Figure 3). However, this ternary system quickly becomes unstable, producing a semiotic crisis of altaholism, a state of semiotic noise in which the original dyadic relation of identity of the player with a main character is disrupted, destabilized, and third terms, alts, begin to proliferate past control, coming to resemble a pathological infestation of parasites (Figure 4). The alt, no longer limited to alternate identity, instead becomes a "joker" or "wild card" with respect to the world and the game itself. Just as the proliferation of real non-human "parasites" (rats, bed bugs, etc) is seen as a pathology within urban space, the proliferation of nonhuman "avatar parasites" (which includes both alts and fully automated bots to which alts are frequently compared or assimilated) becomes related not only to jocular personal pathologies like altaholism, but also becomes a pathological condition of whole online worlds.

Figure 11. Homin (player character) resting under a tree in the deserts of Atys

Two Pandemics: Alts and Mods

Here I have summarized the main outlines of single ethnographic case which I develop in more detail elsewhere, a small, but advanced, situation of proliferating parasites in the online game Ryzom which takes place on the science fantasy world Atys, an entirely organic world populated by diverse strange animals and a humanoid population called "homins" (Figure 11). In this world, the alt, the avatar deployed as a wild card, a joker, a parasite of the game ecology, comes to become a dominant life form in the ecosystem, moving steadily away from being an alternate embodiment of

a human player ("homin"), and more like a kind of nonhuman companion species (for example, a "pet" like a Mektoub mount (Figure 12)) or permanent servant caste, or even an automaton ("bot").[1] Describing this pandemic infestation of game worlds by alts and bots, where game worlds change from human communities into ghost planets, players tended to slip into a language of disease ("virus"), pathology and parasitism ("bots"), as well as sociopathic self-advancement ("competition", "me me power leveling"), which stood in opposition to desirable humane properties of the world (community, role playing and immersion):

> The only other game I played as long as I have played Ryzom was Asheron's call 1. There I watched as bots gradually took over the game world. I watched as this destroyed the community because we went from role playing and emersion, to me me power leveling. I watched as the competitive aspect of PvP compelled many to "keep up" thus felt they were forced to bot too in order to stay competitive, thus it spread like a virus. ….
>
> The great thing about Ryzom is that Bots seem to be kept at bay… so far… but… [Vonzuben 2009]

Another player located the problem not in "botting" (pure automation) but in a language of "cloning", referring to the practice of "multi-syncing" which "clones" keystrokes, which turned alts into "artificially synchronized hominoids", or even "soulless bots":

> I'm playing Ryzom, not Star Wars - Clone Wars. It is the use of third party softwares that I have to rebel against, I don't care if it's by the Empire or the Tryker Federation. I'm affraid, that when I'll return at the end of the semester, there will be nothing but 12-20 players and an army of soulless bots to welcome me back on Atys. [Kalindra 2011]

As each individual avatar embodiment ceases to point to a unique human offline, the questions about other avatars cease to be questions of identity, rather, the proliferation of avatar parasites (alts and bots) comes to make the humanity of all avatars suspect: altaholism begins as an individual pathology of identity of avatars and becomes a pandemic problem of identifying "hominity" of avatars. The varying figurations of the alt in the world of Ryzom, from anthropomorphic to technomorphic, autonomous actor to automaton, show the alt as joker, a wild card, exploring and complicating the simple ontology of avatar as passive relay of identity between offline and online worlds, and complicating and exploring the ontology of the online world.

What the proliferation of altaholism in Ryzom shows is that the game, which always spills beyond the represented online world, is like a horn of plenty, full of unexplored potentialities, and alts join the "parasites, noises and grub(s) [which] swarm around this horn" (Serres 1982:164). The alt, like the parasite, is an ambivalent third figure: Ryzom players ask themselves and ask others, does altaholism represent a pathology of the online world, or an emergence and evolution of it?

> Soon the question becomes much more general: such a parasite is responsible for the growth of the system's complexity, such a parasite stops it. The other question is still

> there: are we in the pathology of systems or in their emergence or evolution? [Serres 1982: 14]

Alts represent a third term, a pathology, on several levels: first, altaholism as an individual complaint, a pathological version of the "plural existence" long identified as a condition of avatar embodiment (Taylor 1999), a problem of identity; secondly, when this altaholism reaches pandemic proportions becomes a pathology of the world, occasioning questions about the identity and humanity of *all* other avatars; third, when altaholism becomes so extensive that a single player can run whole "alt armies" simultaneously using external third-party software, the pathology becomes a property not only of player and world, but also colonizes the user interface between the player and the world.

The proliferation of alts deserves comparison with the better-studied proliferation of player-created modification of the user-interface (so-called "mods") (on which see Taylor 2009, Nardi 2010: 143-151). Like mods, each parasitic use of the alt, each altaholism- related pathology, opens a black box, or even a Pandora's box, and reveals a normally latent ontology of player embodiment, of the world, and of the user interface. Again just as with mods, each parasitic use of the alt represents a pathology of systems and also an emergence: some such parasites are rejected by the host, some eventually are absorbed as symbiotes (Nardi (2010: 149-151).

The alt, whose "roles or incarnations are a function of the relation" (Serres 1982: 63) explores and lays bare the very relation that it is parasitic upon, making it comparable not to other avatars, but to user-created modifications of the user interface. Designers say: "Don't play the user interface, play the game....[we want you] look at the world not the bars" (cited in Nardi 2010: 80). Many designers have an ideology that privileges gaming experiences of presence, immediacy and immersion, accordingly, they seek to make the interface between the player and the avatar, the player and the online world, invisible and immutable. But alts, like mods, open up the blackbox of the normally latent, invisible, interface that serves as the medium or bridge between the player and main character, or the avatar and the world. They make the user interface ever more visible.

At the same time, alts, like mods, are nonhuman actors to whom players have delegated or distributed their competences: alts and mods alike represent forms of *delegation*, in which the black box of the player's agency, competence or "skill" is opened up, distributed and delegated to nonhuman actors (alts and mods). Ryzom players draw attention to this delegation when they speak of their alts as servants, slaves or non-persons, or when they lump them together with tools like magical amplifiers ("amps") which have some of the same functions: "Never leave home without your amps or alts".

Through these delegations, alts begin as anthropomorphic figures within the world and slowly move to becoming silent, technomorphic figures of the interface (and are spoken of more and more as non-persons or non-humans), while mods begin as technomorphic figures of the interface and move to becoming actors in the world. Taylor (2009) uses the example of a player-produced modification of the World of Warcraft interface called CTRaidAssist (CTRA), which broadcasts warnings to players during high-level dungeon raids. On the one hand, the CTRA mod simply makes visible information already present in a player's user interface, but at other times, CTRA seems to become another *speaking* member of the raiding group, by textually shouting out warnings to players:

> Without the [CTRA] mod, it is common for a member of the raid to do the work of typing out the information in a chat channel or speaking it over a voice server, but here the mod takes over, it stands alongside the players—sometimes simply facilitating their actions, sometimes acting as a kind of additional member to the group. A 'distribution of competences between humans and nonhumans' (Latour, 1992, p. 233) is at work here, not only between an individual member and their mods but among the competencies f the group as a whole and their collective use of various software. [Taylor 1999:335]

Alts and mods, though different as *figurations* (alts are anthropomorphic, mods are technomorphic figures), raise some of the same questions because of their shared role in *delegation* (Latour 1992): both perform some of the tasks that would normally require a "player" or "player character". Mods, like alts, are parasites of the world and especially the user interface that normally mediates more or less invisibly between player and world. As Nardi shows, for example, mods enter the world of World of Warcraft into those niches where the "blackbox" of the user interface was "not wholly closed", and, like alts, have functions of delegation ("reduce player effort"), and exploration ("make visible invisible parts of the game") among perhaps countless other functions (Nardi 2010: 143, 146). As with alts, mods enter as parasites of the host, they begin by being considered a pathological par by the original designers, and sometimes are rejected by the host, and then, redubbed as "addons", they are absorbed into the host, becoming part of a new user interface (Nardi 2010: 149-151). Alts in Ryzom certainly traverse some of the same terrain, but the ethnographic moment for this paper is at a stage where the diagnosis of altaholism is still distinctly pathological.

Figure 12. Homin and Mektoub in the lakelands of Atys

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

1. In Ryzom, the term "homin" can be used in sense (1) to mean any avatar that has anthropomorphic ("hominoid") form, as opposed to animals and insectoid beings called kitins, but it is more often used by players in sense (2) to mean any such avatar that is actually created by or controlled by a player (a "player character"), whether a main character, an alt, or a bot, in contrast to NPCs ("non-player characters") which are "homins" in sense (1) (in opposition to "mobs" or other non-hominoid mobile entities like animals or kitins) but are not homins in sense (2) (because they are controlled by AI like animals and kitins.) ⏎