“Man is always beyond himself,” the French philosopher Jean Wahl wrote in 1954, already considering the “other” and the “I” as fundamental parts of the self (Wahl 721). Emmanuel Levinas translates this relationship as it is outlined by his friend and turns it into one of alterity and transcendence, casting transcendence (the “going out from oneself”) as a necessarily inter-subjective relationship between an “I” and its “other” who remain connected yet separate at the same time (see Hayat xii). The work of these two philosophers, as that of so many others, points toward the enigmatic question that stands behind this paper: How can we understand ourselves, if we are already beyond ourselves?

Social, psychological, and philosophical theory have, time and again, pointed out the inextricable link between the formation of the self (the “I”) and the positing of the “other” to a point where the formulation “Identities and Alterities” could not possibly be otherwise. (Where one goes, there follows the other, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.) It is, however, exactly with this “otherwise” that we must take issue, at a point in time and technology where the boundary of priority that lies between concepts of the self and concepts of the other is in danger of being rendered unusable, of the old dialectic becoming simply an avatar of itself.

The invocation of the figure of the avatar here is more than a leading rhetorical device; the concept is an important one for any attempt to discuss identity in the complex digital age. An avatar, apart from (but related to) its traditional mystical connotations, is usually defined as an incarnation or a manifestation of an object of worship or admiration. The term is most traditionally used as a designation in Hindu mysticism, most notably in the Indian religion of Vaishnism, in which the supreme being, Bhagavan, (or, in more common parlance, the god Vishnu) incarnates any number
of times, following the Indian doctrine of cycles. In more colloquial use, the term might also designate an enlightened individual, someone who has reached a state of awareness without limitations, and has returned to the created (profane) world, as well as an individual who acts as a human intermediary between God and mortals. In the digital world, however, an avatar is a (sometimes graphical, sometimes textual) icon or representation of a user within a shared virtual reality. In other words, an avatar is a digital you. Of course, the theory of self-created identities, even those which have physical manifestations, is not a shockingly new subject of interest; the manifold literature on cross-dressing, on transgender politics, on gender studies, and even on postcolonial studies is filled with references to similar ideas involving the socio-personal construction of identities. Yet unique to avatar identities is a straightforwardly mystical connotation of a truly virtual or other-worldly identity that hovers just outside the physical body, which we should not be too quick to ignore. Like Levinas’ “I which exits the self,” avatars can be seen as a type of transcendent alterity which is both created and controlled by the self.

Online avatars are usually treated as virtual manifestations of physical bodies, thus reversing the traditional definition, in which the avatar takes on a physical form as the bodily incarnation of a spiritual ideal of affect. Rather unexpectedly, however, the traditional definition works here as well, and provides a perhaps more interesting and complex paradigm within which we can explore the ramifications of these strange apparitions of the physical, mental or emotional self. Rather than approaching our online avatars as purely virtual manifestations of physical subjects, it is my contention that we must approach these online identities in a more mystical sense – as manifestations of idealized visions of the self. In the Virtual Reality (VR) world, “selves” gain an unexpected degree of freedom, existing as whomever and whatever they wish to be. No longer tied to an identity bounded by geographical, social, or even physical, biographical limitations, online avatars are fantasies come to life, individual chances to step outside of one’s usual self, to transcend the boundaries of one’s own identity in something not unlike a religious experience.

Before going too far, however, we should ask ourselves how or where these avatars stand in relation to the primary identities from which they originate. Are they actually our own alterities? Or is it the other way around: that by making manifest our idealized selves, we – that is, our primary referential selves – become our own “other”? If this secondary reversal implies a shifting of the primary referential self into a position of strangeness, of “otherness,” then it also implies an opposite movement for the avatar, into the privileged position of familiarity, and, one might go so far as to argue, authenticity – which is a rather unexpected move. The very structure of these reversals implies a notion of priority, a balance of power which is destined to accompany the traditional self / other dialectic around which many, if not all, of our modern constructions of identity are based. VR’s avatar identities imply a transgression of