Virtual Band, Actual Reality
The Actualization of the Virtual by the Gorillaz

Research Thesis

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Picture from Gorillaz Wiki

Meet Stuart Pot: On May 23, 1978, a baby boy was born in Hertfordshire, England. His name was Stuart Pot and he had blue eyes and brown hair. Stuart, or Stu-Pot, grew up to be a little boy who was not so bright. In fact, many considered him to be "mentally deficient." However, he was kind, and he loved music. Parents David and Rachel often could find ten-year-old Stuart listening to his favorite bands in his room and bobbing about. At eleven years old Stuart was climbing a tree, as most kids do, when he fell to the ground. The impact caused all his hair to fall out, and when it eventually came back it grew out a rich blue tone. Stuart attended St. Wilfred's boarding school in Crawly, England. After graduation Stuart got a part time job at Uncle Norm's Organ Emporium. He was working on August 15, 1997 when a "Satanist hoodlum" ran his Vauxhall Astra into the building during an attempted raid, hitting Stuart. Stuart's head was fractured in the accident which left him in a catatonic state. The left side of Stuart's head was permanently fractured and his left eye turned black as a result. He did not stay in a coma for long, however. A year later Stuart, still in a comatose state, was riding in the passenger seat of a car when it suddenly veered into a 360 degree spin and Stuart was thrown out the windshield. He landed face first on the curb, permanently injuring the right side of his head which resulted in his right eye turning black. Nevertheless, Stuart was awake.[1]

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[1] "2-D." *Gorillaz Wiki*, gorillaz.wikia.com/wiki/2-D

The Museum of Virtual Media[2] begins with an exhibit in storytelling, which followed by one about graphics, then sculpture. The museum winds around, displaying tools and rituals both unrecognizable and blaringly familiar to modern day visitors; "history teaches us that old media never die—and they don't even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content."[3] It ends with the computer and the internet, tools that have become almost integral to the human experience despite being so new. In the short time since its conception, these tools have initiated a renaissance of culture in the digital realm for cross-world communication and the production and release of art. The internet has significant potential to influence societal thought; Henry Jenkins indicates that media work on two different levels in society "on the first, a medium is a technology that enables communication; on the second, a medium is a set of associated protocols or social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology."[4] Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailenson imagined the Museum of Virtual Media as a display of the proximity the virtual has had to actuality for all of history, and of the methods by which the virtual attempts to be actualized. This paper explores the ways in which many of these media converge and actualize one virtual reality in tandem; by the end it appears the convergence of media is both a more effective and more fair method of spreading information since medium faces its own limits. As these are sophisticated questions regarding virtuality, actuality and convergence, it seems almost humorous that the subject of this paper should be a group of fictional, humanoid beasts. However, the Gorillaz, a virtual band

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[2] Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailsenson. 2011. "A Museum of Virtual Media." *Natural History.* 119 (8).
[3] Henry Jenkins. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press. 13.
[4] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 14.

active since the turn of the century, represents mastery of the virtual and is a unique case in both the music and digital world.

As a whole, the band has been classified as alternative rock, hip-hop, electronica, indie, and more. Christian Hoard describes its sound as "a playful, slightly surreal mishmash of hip-hop beats, pop melodies and delicate electronic touches."[5] As with many other bands, my first impression of the Gorillaz was by a popular single, in this case "Feel Good, Inc," from the Gorillaz's sophomore album, *Demon Days.* The song is sung by 2-D and questions the authority and authenticity of the music industry.

> The verse is performed in a distorted and filtered voice, immediately signaling a loss of (vocal) immediacy that goes along with an overall sense of disillusionment. This is to some extent supported by a laconic thrust of the overall musical soundscape – in the tune's signature bass-line, performing a circular, mirror-image movement emphatically beginning and ending in the same note, and in the thin, two note guitar support laconically and monotonously descending a fairly simple three-step minor-chord progression. But it is especially the melodic progression of the vocals, flippantly descending ('city's breaking down') to an almost doggedly repeated note ('on a camel's back') to which they emphatically return in 'don't know whack', which supports a sense of exhaustion and frustration. [6]

According to Eckstein, "'Feel Good, Inc.' self-consciously (and ironically) plays out a modernist discourse of alienation and despair against a romanticist vision of wholeness and integrity, both facing a third discourse of 'capitalist realism.'"[7] His reading of the song varies greatly from mine when I first heard it. I was young and thought of the single as "that laughing song," thanks to the manic cackle that begins and ends the track. It was a while before I encountered the band again, and this time I was more aware of the complexities Eckstein is referencing. However, even if listeners are not aware of an underlying message of subversion of the mainstream music

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[5] Christian Hoard. 2006. "Gorillaz. (Concert review)". Rolling Stone. (999).
[6] Lars Eckstein. "Torpedoing the authorship of popular music: a reading of Gorillaz' 'Feel Good Inc.". 2009. Popular Music. 28 (2): 247
[7] Eckstein. "Torpedoing Authorship." 245

industry, most will appreciate the playful approach to sound and musicality that gives this song and many others by the Gorillaz an unrivaled place in the music industry. Both widely palatable and uneasily defined, the Gorillaz' sound has an extensive range, and it is for this reason that it is hard to fit it exactly in a single genre.

The oddity of the Gorillaz continues and perhaps intensifies in the concert experience. Concerts are the opportunity for fans to witness a band physically create music, something which is impossible for the Gorillaz since the members do not possess physicality. Furthermore, it would be inauthentic for Albarn to assume the stage and perform the music as his own (even though it arguably is.) Especially in their early days, Albarn's evasion of the spot light helped distinguish the band as its own entity. By taking the stage, Albarn would ultimately disappoint fans by undermining the validity of the virtual band. So then, what does it look like when a cartoon band performs live in concert? In 2006, 1,500 fans payed seventy dollars each to discover just that, one of whom being *Rolling Stone's* Christian Hoard. The show featured a "sprawling cast of characters and open-armed good vibes," the stars of which were "the animated hipster chimps…popping up in puppet form on a balcony for a bantering introduction and appearing in dreamlike videos that played throughout the show."[8] Accompanying the animated chimps on stage was a collection of guest musicians like Dennis Hopper, Ike Turner. De La Soul, an orchestra and two choirs. The human guests "were a mix of refinement and good-natured eccentricity, with Albarn playing piano and singing in a boyish croon at the back of the stage, allowing the guest performers to grab the spotlight."[9] An earlier performance at

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[8] Hoard. "Concert Review."
[9] Hoard. "Concert Review."

the 2002 Brit Awards in London was significantly more digitally dependent. The Gorillaz opened

the show, with just four looming screens for a set. The show began when "the silhouetted

image of 2-D, the aptly named animated front man of ''virtual band'' Gorillaz, emerged out of

the primal matter of television static in a manner resembling a key scene in the classic suspense

film Poltergeist. Three additional figures materialized on separate screens."[10] John Richardson

was in the audience for the event and wrote about it later in relation to the construction of the

virtual. In this performance, "The band themselves were physically absent (unlike Kylie, Dido,

Sting, and others), replaced by animated caricatures of the 'real musicians.'" Richardson argues

"the poor quality of 'live' sound in the venue, frequent disjunctions in narrative flow… all served

to undermine any sense of authentic or unmediated communion between artists and

audience,"[11] However, this early show foreshadows a community that is undeterred by

unconventionality of a digital band and rather, like Albarn, see the unifying and collaborative

potential of the digital.

The band is comprised of four members: front man 2-D, satanic bad-buy Murdoc,

American drummer Russel and cool girl Noodle. These characters perform during their concerts

and music videos, and have social presences online. Albarn has been quoted saying he created

the characters as a "complete reaction to what is going on in the charts at the moment…

Everything is so manufactured these days…Gorillaz are different. They may only appear in

cartoon form but, believe me, they are larger than life."[12] Jamie Hewlett's original animation

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[10] John Richardson. 2005. ""The Digital Won't Let Me Go": Constructions of the Virtual and the Real in Gorillaz' "Clint Eastwood"1". Journal of Popular Music Studies. 17 (1): 1-29.
[11] Richardson. "The Digital Won't Let Me Go." 2.
[12] Quoted by Richardson. "The Digital Won't Let Me Go." 2.

style and the structure of the band's narrative are reminiscent of Japanese manga, a source of

inspiration for the creators. Manga are comics with installments that are released over the span

of multiple years. With each installment readers strengthen and deepen their perception of

characters. Like manga, the Gorillaz develop a sense of personalities through a gradual

revelation of these characters, only this is done through digital media such as videos, online

social profiles and chat forums. Each post online is an opportunity to establish character traits

and backstories for each of the members. Intricate details like the story of how Stuart Pot got

his last name, or the story of Murdoc burning down their home in 2005 before moving to Plastic

beach, or the one of Russel gaining the power to invoke the souls of dead rappers,[13] are stories

that cannot be told through music video, but matter to the solidifying of these characters.

Additionally, they are unlike other fictional characters because the members age in real time.

When she was first introduced, Noodle was a child. Sixteen years later and her feed now

belongs to a young adult, her story documented on Instagram creating a permanent digital

timeline. When we as actual beings interact with the virtual, it is usually an immersive

experience for us. The Gorillaz are immersed in our world. The band members exist in a middle

ground of being fictional characters but having a presence in our lives that resemble our own.

Picture from Gorillaz Wiki

[13] "2-D." *Gorillaz Wiki*, gorillaz.wikia.com/wiki/

Picture from Gorillaz Wiki

Meet Murdoc Niccals: Although no one is certain, it is said that Murdoc Niccals was born at a halfway house for "the sick, the needy and the incredibly bored" on June 6, 1966. Murdoc grew up with an abusive father, harsh teachers, and cruel peers. However, Murdoc is not completely innocent. He "gained a reputation for his truancy, pranks, ugliness, poor personal hygiene and bad behavior," He would "lurk" around Sodsworth Comprehensive School while he was attending, distracting students by quacking at them or causing some other sort of disturbance. In one instance, Murdoc was insulting a rather thuggish bully Tony Choppers, and in return received a punch to the face and a broken nose. Despite all this, Murdoc demonstrated an undeniable charisma and a propensity for convincing people to take his side.

After school, Murdoc would often perform, at his dad's will, at a local pub. Although he resented the way his father forced him to perform, Murdoc found a calling on the stage. He vowed that as a musician he would not take direction from anybody. However, he was not opposed to help. In fact, Murdoc enlisted the help of a very powerful entity to become famous. Murdoc started making deals with the devil, the ultimate being the exchange of Murdoc's soul for rock greatness. So, Murdoc became a Satanist for the sake of becoming a rock god, perks of which include a brand-new bass

named "El Diablo," a gift from the devil himself, as well as a new middle name, "Faust."

Murdoc was in a few bands during the 1990's, although none of them was very popular. In 1994, his band, Murdoc's Burning Sensations, broke up and Murdoc started hanging around criminals. A few years later, Murdoc and the gang went on a crime spree, first stealing a Vauxhall Astra, then heading to Uncle Norm's Organ Emporium where certain synthesizer equipment had caught Murdoc's eye. However, he miscalculated and drove the stolen car into the building, hitting one worker with deep azure hair directly in the face. Murdoc was arrested, sentenced to 30,000 hours of community service and an additional 10 hours a week caring for Stuart Pot, the employee he had sent into a coma. A year into his sentence, Murdoc was driving accompanied by Stuart's comatose body when he spotted a group of women. In an effort to impress, Murdoc launched into a 360-degree spin, sending Stuart flying out the windshield and hitting the sidewalk. Stuart woke up, now with a pair of black eyes and twin dents in his skull. Murdoc nicknamed him 2-D and recruited his post-comatose friend to join his band.[14]

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[14] "Murdoc Niccals." *Gorillaz Wiki.* Gorillaz.wikia.com/wiki/Murdoc_Niccals

The Gorillaz maintains its musical and cultural presence on a variety of different digital media in addition to the typical ways listeners engage with musicians. Their members' online profiles converge to create one whole and multi-dimensional digital identity. Despite its significance as a virtual band, the Gorillaz does not represent every model of convergence culture nor digital communication. Therefore, it will be helpful examine other digital forms of convergence culture to contextualize the mechanics the Gorillaz is implementing. Here we may again refer to Henry Jenkins and his experience with an online fan group. In his book, *Convergence Culture,* Jenkins studies various forms of digital technology and its tendency to converge. Jenkins acknowledges a shift from converging hardware (for example, the universal remote) to converging content.[15] He defines convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."[16] The relationships and communications Jenkins observes are facilitated by technology, whether it be a realty television show, an online chat room, or a video game. The boom in technology is a boom in methods of communication. However, Jenkins reminds us that convergence culture is "more than simply a technological shift."[17] instead it has the power to alter the ways individuals and engage with industries, technologies, markets, and each other. The phenomenon presented in the book is one to be praised, as it encourages communication, collaboration and participation from many people over a great distance. The Gorillaz fits into Jenkins' model of convergence culture in two

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[15] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 15.
[16] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 2.
[17] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 15.

variations: the Gorillaz represents a collective of information spread across a variety of media and, simultaneously, a point of conversation and a reason for people to come together. On two different levels the band offers a virtual, digital point of convergence.

Although Jenkins by no means assumes all media to be digital, the media he chooses to engage with *are*. The cultures Jenkins explores are mostly fandoms for television or film, but for many of these fandoms the show is only a part of the culture. Additionally, a participatory public interacts with each amongst itself and studies the television show by digital means. For example, as a fan of *Survivor,* Jenkins spends a lot of time with a community of "spoilers," or fans who dedicate their time to discovering the outcomes of the show before the producers themselves reveal it. Other fandoms like *Star Wars* have introduced games, both actual and virtual, that not only encourage consumer participation but require it. The Gorillaz, in its own way, requires participation from its audience. Thanks to its unique status as a virtual band, the Gorillaz plays with identity and celebrity in a manner other musicians cannot, and it chose to construct these elements digitally. While it is not unusual for musicians and celebrities to have social profiles on digital social networks, the profiles of our band members are unique because they were created as their own entities, independent of a physical embodiment. The Gorillaz can also approaches the human body with whimsy and imagination, considering the band members do not need to exist within limitations of our physical world. The choice to bind these fictional identities to four digital bodies alludes to a greater discussion regarding the virtual body, and therefore the virtual world, much of which can be found in scholarship about video games. Because the Gorillaz is such a unique case, a thorough examination of the digital

mechanics the Gorillaz is manipulating prompts us to explore virtual spaces beyond those the Gorillaz is occupying.

There is very little about social media platforms such as Instagram or Facebook in Jenkins' book-unsurprising considering it was published only three years after the conception of MySpace and two years after the introduction of Facebook. However, in this book Jenkins still believes "we should be talking about communal media—media that become part of our lives as members of communities."[18] Jenkins observes these communities to be created around media such as television shows or books. As both a fan and a scholar, Jenkins believes in the unifying power of television. He argues that television shows are the ideal subject for "water cooler conversations,"[19] conversations which he has acknowledged have moved into the digital realm. In the previously mentioned *Survivor* spoiling community, these water cooler conversations were of course inspired by the narrative of the show, but also the ways in which members themselves uncover these secrets. One of the members of this community is ChillOne, a lurker who not only theorizes about unrevealed *Survivor* outcomes, but also retells the spoilers on the internet for fellow investigators. Jenkins is "less interested, ultimately, in who ChillOne is or whether their information was accurate than [he is] with how the community responded to, evaluated, debated, critiqued, and came to grips with the kinds of knowledge he brought to them."[20] Well, the community responds by launching them into internet fame. ChillOne's formula for creating content was simple: find out *Survivor* spoilers and beat producers at their own game by beating them to the punchline. Their posts were arguably more effective in story

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[18] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 245.
[19] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 25.
[20] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 26.

telling than the show itself, considering they captivated an entire digital community, and they did so by strategically revealing or withholding information. Somewhere along the line the focus of the community shifted from the show to what ChillOne had to say about the show. Their identity became a topic of discussion. Members of the spoiler community theorize that ChillOne is a cover for someone already in the community or that they had intel from the production company, or even that they are making everything up.[21] In the end, Jenkins claims "ChillOne's intervention no doubt shortened the life of the *Survivor* spoiling community, yet they merely sped up what was going to be an inevitable decline of interest."[22] And in the meanwhile, ChillOne virtually, digitally became the point of interest. What this gives us and this paper is a model. Similar to ChillOne, the Gorillaz is the virtual creation of an actual human and serves as a point of convergence in digital media. Only, unlike the spoiler community, the Gorillaz has so far been able to grow with and adapt to the ever-changing digital media field.

Jenkins says, "Survivor is television for the Internet age—designed to be discussed, dissected, debated, predicted, and critiqued." [23]I believe that while *Survivor* may be a great example, it is by no means the only online community of its type. In fact, I would argue that Jenkins's *Survivor* spoilers are the precursors to a new online community, the theorists, who do not discriminate in their musings, and in fact consider many narratives (from film, television, video games and more) at once when building their theories. "Transmedia storytelling is the art
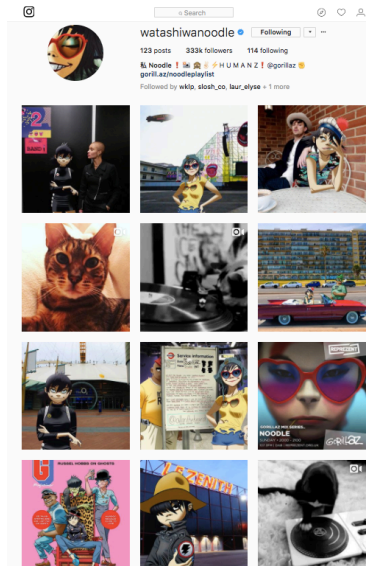
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[21] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 43.
[22] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 57.
[23] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 25.

of world making,"[24] and the digital especially encourages the creation of stories, ideas, and theories across platforms.

Picture from Instagram

Fan art by u/cerrvine, posted to r/gorillaz

A platform that sees a lot of theorizing would be Reddit thanks to its many user-created boards called subreddits, which are theme-based chat forums with their own topic, social rules, and participants. This format allows for many and varying points of convergence that reflect a wide variety of interests, whether it be Harry Potter or DIY projects for the home, or cute pictures of animals. It comes as no surprise that more than a few subreddits are inspired by the Gorillaz. The official Gorillaz subreddit is full of fan art, music reviews, and of course theories. The subreddit, like other subreddits with intersecting interests such as r/music, has also hosted AMAs with a band member or two, if not all four members at once. An AMA, or ask-me-anything, is a format often used on subreddits to connect Reddit users with a person or group of interest. Recently, to promote its most recent album Humanz*,* the band participated in an AMA on r/music. Also within the last year, 2-D hosted his own AMA on the official Gorillaz

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[24] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 21.

subreddit. I went over the questions asked by fans and the ways the band answered in these two AMAs[25] and discovered a few things: fan favorite band members appear to be Murdoc and Noodle, since they were asked for by name the most. However, Murdoc and 2-D are by far the most vocal, with one or the other of them answering most questions not directed to any particular member, and even some of those addressing Noodle or Russel. As for the topic of the question, about half of the questions answered by the band addressed more practical matters – matters that could be asked of most bands, regardless of virtuality.

> How would you explain the band to someone who's never heard of you before?
>
> If you could describe each of your albums in just a few words (say, 5?), including the new one, what would you say about them?
>
> What would you say to the people who think the new album has "too much rap in it"?

Other members simply wanted to express their admiration.

> Why on earth did you make us wait 6 years for this glorious album? either way thank you for releasing it!

Different still, and what makes the Gorillaz different from any other band are the questions engaging with the band's digital and fictional nature. These are the questions that discuss lore and engage with the narrative aspect of the band.

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[25]"AMA We Are The Gorillaz Ask Us Anything." www.reddit.com/r/Music. "Hello World 2D Here Ask Me Anything." www.reddit.com/r/gorillaz.

2D: how did you pass the time while inside that whale's stomach?
I'm sure wifi isn't very good in there.

Has Noodle ever met Cyborg Noodle? If so, how did that meeting go?

What happened to Plastic Beach?

These questions give the Gorillaz the opportunity to reveal character traits and narrative points

and to establish the rules of their own world. To the user who inquired about his time inside

the whale, 2-D responded, "Thank you for your question. I had trouble finding a wifi signal. So

at first I felt quite lonely. But I started to enjoy a bit of me-time in the end. Even wrote a few

songs using the rib cage as a xilophone. Have I spelt xlyophone right? Xylofone. Hang on…" 2-D

responds to the question and then some, revealing he is social, optimistic, and a bad speller in

the mean while. Next there are the questions that are more abstract, either in subject or form.

Who the fuck is this Damien Albran fella and why is he
constantly taking credit for your music?

What did you have for breakfast?

Do you feel very blah blah when you blah blah blah blah blah?

Although obscure and, frankly, strange, these questions inspire some of the best answers and

therefore story-telling. The Gorillaz is successful as a virtual band because it uses every

interaction online with fans as an opportunity to cultivate its virtual world. The simple question-

answer format of the AMA could be seen as limiting, but the Gorillaz injects personality and

solidifies the rules of its world in every answer. Since there is little lead given in strange or

mundane questions, the group can really flex its imagination in these responses. There is opportunity also for fans to contribute to the world building every time they ask a question, and every answer received is verification. Murdoc answers the user asking about Damien Albarn: "We don't know, who the fuck is Damien Allbran? Sounds like he'd make a great breakfast." This response serves a greater purpose than just as a mediocre pun. While not denying the connection, it reinforces the Gorillaz as its own identity separate from Albarn. The format relies on both the fans to provide questions and the band to elevate the questions with its answers. Together the fans and the band create and reveal the intricacies of the Gorillaz' world. The series of small revelations create a sense of authenticity as it mirrors learning in real life. More important for Jenkins, however, would be the convergence of users to further develop a virtual world for the sake of both band and fans. Just like Jenkins's group of spoilers, the community and the culture would not exist without the collective effort of individual members. "This circulation of media content—across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders—depends heavily on consumers' active participation,"[26] and they are due some of the credit for the cultivation of convergence. The Gorillaz virtual world is sustained by convergence culture in two ways: a converging of fans and creators to write the narrative and a converging of media with which the narrative is being written. As plain as it might seem, a simple question like "What did you have for breakfast" is a brick in a colossal virtual structure. And as you wondering what the band had for breakfast, each band member enjoyed a full serving of nutritious Damien Allbran.

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[26] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 3.

Picture from Gorillaz Wiki

Meet Russel Hobbs: Russel is the only American in the group. He was born in Brooklyn, New York on June 3, 1975. Although a bright and polite child, he suffered a rough childhood. He was expelled from a prestigious school for demonic possession and after enrolled at Brooklyn High School. There he befriended many hip hop artists and musicians. One day he and his friends were victims of a drive-by shooting incident. Russel, the sole survivor, became an unwilling vessel of his friends' spirits which continue to appear.

After the incident, Russel moved to the United Kingdom and found a job at Big Rick Black's Record Shack in London's Soho. One day while he was working a customer came in and asked to see an obscure 50s record. Russel turned from the customer and immediately the customer slipped a bag over his head and kidnapped him. The customer, who was later revealed to be Murdoc, brought Russel to his recently acquired property, Kong Studios. He and his automotive-accident-victim-turned-friend 2-D showed Russel the music they were working on. Russel was impressed and decided to join the band as a drummer. As 2-D's girlfriend, Paula Cracker, also joined the band he was the fourth and final member. That was, until, Russel caught Paula Cracker and Murdoc hooking up in the toilets. Paula Cracker left the band after that and Murdoc received five more punches to the nose, this time by Russel's fist. And the band was left without a guitarist. [27]

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[27] Russel Hobbs." *Gorillaz Wiki*, gorillaz.wikia.com/wiki/Russel_Hobbs

In the present day, many of our online communities gather via social networks such as Instagram and Facebook. However, communities are not the only cultural phenomenon to be found on social networks. Another would be the creation and preservation of digital, social identities. Understanding the creation of the digital identity and how it relates to the real identity is more easily seen when focusing on significant and heavily-followed identities online, such as the profiles of celebrities, athletes and musicians. They cultivate online identities as another branch of their selves, perhaps thanks to the easy commodification of a digital identity. In photos and 140 characters, with the help of makeup artists and photo editors, celebrities project a version of their self into the digital, typically an idealized version. In a sense, we all form caricatures or else idealized versions of ourselves on social media or in public spaces. We present the parts of ourselves that construct an image of us that we want other people to have. The members of the Gorillaz are also constructions of online profiles. They, however, do not have the addition of physical bodies that many celebrities do. Still, they make up for a lack of body by expanding the methods by which celebrities and fans digitally interact. After all, social media platforms are not the only ways by which we create digital identities.

An element of the virtual identity that is not often implemented on social media platforms is the avatar, a virtually physical embodiment of an identity in an online world. Very often, a virtual body comes in the form of an avatar, and very often these avatars are mechanics in what Tizianna Mancini and Federica Sibilla call massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPGs.[28] Mancini and Sibilla investigated the ways in which players

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[28] Tiziana Mancini and Federica Sibilla. 2017. "Offline personality and avatar customisation. Discrepancy profiles and avatar identification in a sample of MMORPG players". Computers in Human Behavior. 69: 275-283.

engage with their avatars in a handful of these MMOORPGs. They found that users engage with

their avatars to variety of degrees, sometimes using their offline selves as an inspiration for an

online character but not always. When it comes to the creation of the avatar, "Avatars may be

closer to either the player's actual offline self (actualization) or his or her ideal offline self

(idealization)." However, "the player's offline personality is not always the starting point for

avatar customization; sometimes an avatar embodies the socially desirable characteristics that

the player would like to have, sometimes it embodies socially undesirable characteristics."[29]

One might say our band members possess a few socially undesirable characteristics as well. So,

despite the fact that the members of the Gorillaz are manufactured at the hands of an artist

and musician, and remembering that some of Albarn and animator Jamie Hewlett's personality

probably served as inspiration for the band, the characters themselves still operate as unique

personalities with their own set of characteristics. But how does an avatar exist in a social

space? Mancini and Sibilla found that users construct the identity of the avatar not with

"individual personality factors but at the level of overall social desirability, i.e., rather than

setting out to construct an avatar which is more (or less) extrovert than his or her actual (or

ideal) self, a player focuses on the overall personality of the avatar,"[30] implying self-

discrepancy. Although they do not exist in an MMOORGP, the Gorillaz still exhibits traits found

in the digital self-discrepancy model. Armed with this text we can see the purpose of the

Gorillaz is not as representation for the creators but as social creatures meant for the

consumption of fans. Fans are not developing relationships with Albarn when interacting with

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[29] Mancini and Sibilla. "Offline Personality and Avatar Customisation." 281.
[30] Mancini and Sibilla. "Offline Personality and Avatar Customisation." 282.

the members of the band. Albarn is not the man behind the mask but rather a third party all together; he is not a puppet master but rather an inside joke among the band and their friends (fans).

I see two immediate counters to my argument here. The first would be the objection that because the Gorillaz is composed of digital fictional characters created by Albarn, they themselves are not able to foster "real relationships." And I would say that is true but only to a certain extent. It is true that the Gorillaz are not creatures with independent agency, as they are being controlled by Albarn. However, it is also true that these band members can form pseudo relationships, or at least, fans can foster relationships with band members. These pseudo relationships are called parasocial, and figures ranging from celebrities to characters in books are potential subjects. They are originated and sustained by the fan, and the fans of the Gorillaz are good at their job. The second objection I anticipate would be the that the Gorillaz are not avatars walking around an MMOORGP world, so the emphasis on the importance of their bodies is reduced. I would again counter that the choice to create bodies helps both visual legibility and matters of identification among musicians and fans. Albarn and Hewlett's particular choices of band members indicate an assumption about the ways certain bodies engage with music. However, with questions of appropriation afoot, this topic is best left to another paper.

Picture from Gorillaz Wiki

Meet Noodle: Noodle is the youngest of the group by 15 years. She was born on October 31, 1990 in Osaka, Japan. She and 22 other children were subjects of a classified project. The children were training with the purpose of becoming super soldiers. However, the project was eventually found to be unethical, and the destruction of the grounds as well as subjects was ordered. Mr. Kyuzo was the head scientist for the project, and killed 22 children by order of the government. When he came upon the last child, an eight year old girl, Mr. Kyuzo was unable to follow through. He had grown emotionally attached to the girl and could not stand to see her harmed. Instead, he arranged to hide the child from the Japanese government. To ensure her safety, Mr. Kyuzo gave the girl amnesia. Before the girl could begin to relearn her memories, Mr. Kyuzo shipped her off to an address he copied from an advertisement placed in a British newspaper soliciting guitarists to audition for a band. The girl arrived by a FedEx freight container brandishing a Gibson Les Paul. She was brought into the haunted studio, surprising the three boys there when she jumped out of the box and launched into the "riff to end all riffs." She ended her performance with a karate kick. Although she spoke quick Japanese, she could say one English word: Noodle. And so that became her name. With Noodle to fill the position of lead guitarist, they had a complete band.[31]

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[31] "Noodle." *Gorillaz Wiki*, gorillaz.wikia.com/wiki/Noodle

When I first began working on this project, there was one question I never seemed able to answer: what does a band gain by going virtual? How does it matter? Past iterations of this project either gave answers but provided little support, or else just ignored the question entirely. Rather far along in the project, however, I stumbled upon an article that brought this discussion full circle. William Echard's work on the Deleuzian theory of virtuality is the missing puzzle piece that brings the virtual to the musical and ties up loose ends.[32] Although never displayed in the Museum of Virtual Media, Echard proves that music is a medium just like story-telling and the computer, a medium that has the potential to actualize the virtual. Echard uses Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of virtuality and actuality to describe music's relation to both instruments and the body. The idea to approach music as a portal to the virtual is by no means radical. Music reveals the virtual over time, whether it be a three-minute-long pop song or a two-hour opera. It builds a story, but requires an audience to hear it, even if it's the maker themselves. Additionally, music creates the opportunity for convergence. The sounds of various instruments converge in a song, and dance adds an element of physicality. Since media are just methods by which to actualize the virtual, "each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives,"[33] meaning convergence culture seeks out multiple methods of actualizing the virtual. It is with Echard's theory we can now reexamine our definition of the virtual and investigate further the many-layered relationship between the self, the digital, and convergence communities.

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[32] William Echard. 2006. "Sensible virtual selves: Bodies, instruments and the becoming-concrete of Music". Contemporary Music Review. 25 (1-2): 7-16.
[33] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 3.

I considered many different theories for this essay before reading Echard's work on musicality and virtually, but it was only upon reading him that my own argument came together. Using Echard's work allows me to unpack further the term "the virtual self" while always grounding the argument within the context of music. What I find according to Deluezian thought is that the term "virtual self" is somewhat redundant because the self is *innately* virtual. Echard spends much of his time debating the three components of the actualization of the virtual, always considering the limitations held by what Echard calls the musical subjects performing the actualization. I believe digital mechanisms like an avatar or a social media platform can fulfill the same role as Echard's musical subjects by actualizing the virtual self, much like our own bodies are an actualization of ourselves. Deleuze's virtual requires the actual, which begs the question, what is the actual in the case of the Gorillaz?

Before moving on, let us take the time now to break down Deleuze's concept of virtuality as used by Echard. Deleuze's virtual encompasses all that is real but not actual. Deleuze's virtual is also ideal, but here is where the parallels with our digital virtuality end. As evident from the members' backstories, creators in the digital are interested in exploring identities that are not necessarily self-reflective and not necessarily ideal. However, ideal or not, the virtual requires a counterpart: the actual. Actuality is not less or more real than virtuality, but it possesses a physicality that virtuality lacks and, more importantly, it is always present. Deleuze's virtual exists on the edge of the actual, always accessible but simultaneously fleeting. The virtual and the actual are greater than simple opposites; they possess a complex and many-layered relationship in which the actual has the power to physically validate the virtual. "Deleuze frames every human activity (e.g., philosophy, art and science) as attempts to

give consistency and actuality to the virtual,"[34] and certainly music is no different. By framing

music as an attempt to give actuality to the virtual, the possibility of the virtual becomes

apparent. Echard imagines "a musician's hands and all the possible positions they can assume.

These configurations are never all present together, but they are a real part of the hands."[35] In

the virtual, all the configurations exist simultaneously, while in the actual they may only exist

once at a time. The virtual is advantageous in this way. Although musical subjects give a

physical, actual presence to virtual concepts, the subjects are not equipped to represent the

concept in its virtual entirety. The Gorillaz specifically combat the limitations of a single medium

by using convergence. Beyond just the question of possibility, there is also the matter of the

physical limitations of a subject itself; sheet music is unable to actualize music the way an

instrument can and vice versa. Likewise, different social media platforms facilitate different

sorts of interactions based on their mechanisms (even Facebook and Twitter, platforms that

prefer texts, foster vastly different writing styles). Here is where convergence culture is

especially handy. The Gorillaz uses a multitude of media to actualize its music and the band. By

expanding the range of subjects performing actualization, the Gorillaz broadens its

representation in the actual world, the world of its fans.

Echard defines three pillars in his article: the instrument, the performing body, and

music, and proceeds to explore the peculiarities of the relationships among the three:

> A body can be subject to instruments and to music: transformed over long years of
> practice to a state of proficient compliance. Or, an instrument can be subject to music
> and to bodies: designed, refined and produced to satisfy aesthetic and biomechanical
> specifications. Or, both can be subject to music, and vice versa. [36]

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[34]Echard, William. "Sensible Virtual Selves." 9
[35] Echard, William. "Sensible Virtual Selves." 8
[36] Echard, William. "Sensible Virtual Selves." 7.

While Echard discusses this in musical terms, these convoluted relationships are also present in the digital actualization of the virtual. Among these, the three pillars I would consider there to be the virtual which needs actualizing, the instigator of the actualization (or rather the actual recipient/observer), and lastly a tool or a mode for actualization. The digital, too, depends upon these three pillars as it offers many media with which to actualize the virtual. The Gorillaz and its world are virtual, but it is being actualized by the visual embodiment of the characters, by the music that Albarn writes, and by the convergence of consumers. So, the question is not really what does the band gain by going virtual, because music has always been a medium for virtual awaiting actualization. However, by pairing it so intimately with another powerful form of actualization like digital media, the Gorillaz is executing convergence culture in a method unseen elsewhere in either industry.

The potential influence of convergence culture is evident in the Goriilaz' implementation of multiple digital means to actualize their virtual selves. Convergence culture is beneficial because it allows for a more fair, more efficient, more "ideal"[37] collection of knowledge. Online communities like *Survivor* spoilers are evidence of convergence culture as they are sustained by constant contribution from a variety of sources. As a virtual band, the Gorillaz' approach to online identity is unique from many other artists out there, partially due to the Gorillaz' own dependence on convergence culture. The Gorillaz sustains its presence and position in digital culture thanks to fan interaction through media like social media, and reddit. The use of digital bodies by the Gorillaz aids legibility and ties the project to the human body, something music

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[37] Jenkins. *Convergence Culture.* 247.

requires but the internet lacks. These digital media are of course supplementary to the medium

of music, after all we are talking about a band. However, it is not hard now to see how these

digital media are just another evolution of more traditional media like music. As written by

Deleuze and then Echard, media are methods of actualization, and humanz have been

attempting to actualize the virtual since they began to create music. The addition of digital

media by the Gorillaz only help the band's case.

Picture from Gorillaz Wiki

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