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Exploring post-irony through narratives of love and suffering in VRChat

Master Thesis

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“[...]what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human [...] is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic.” (Wallace 2006 *1996*: 694-695)

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“They are insincere”

25/07/2020 – DESCRIPTION:

I am standing in the Summer Solitude *world*, talking to a self-described “drunk guy”. He goes by the username ICON. At one point, I tell him that I am an anthropology student and vaguely try explaining anthropology as being about “...studying social phenomena and people’s relations with each other”, and that the reason I am on VRChat is to conduct a study of the users in here.

ICON:

The majority of people in here will seem nice, and they want to have fun, so they will be nice to you, I guess, but the majority are insincere. They just create a fake persona that makes them happy.

ICON:

People on here are fake. They are not real. They are insincere and full of shit.

SIMULACRUM96

So why should you be more sincere than anyone else?

ICON:

My time on here is literally just to be creative and share that creativity, whatever, then it was desperation, and then it was back to creativity.

(Pause)

ICON:

I would not write about VRChat at all because this is a cesspool for depressed, desperate, and lonely people.

Introduction

Rapport and Overing define irony as part-and-parcel of the process of structuration by which modernity reproduces itself and knows itself (Rapport & Overing 2002 2000: 213). While acknowledging that I am not representative of modernity as a whole, I really do think that irony, to some degree, has been a “part-and-parcel” of my life. At least some kind of irony has been a fellow traveler throughout my teens to adulthood. I think what I really found fascinating about irony in my teens was how it was related to transgressive expressions, such as the practice of trolling. I would spend much of my free time on the website 4chan, an image-board website described in the Danish newspaper Information as of the internet’s manure and well-known epicenter for internet trolls (Kjeldtoft 2014). An internet troll is one who engages in trolling. Trolling is the practice of intentionally making statements that may be seen as inflammatory or rude to elicit strong emotional responses (Coleman 2015: 4). The trolls may engage in trolling to demonstrate their ideas in a playful way that is neither didactic nor moralizing (Ibid.: 41) Without going further into the many ways in which I engaged in transgressive internet trolling and how it has affected my life, my experiences with trolling were part of my motivation to study anthropology, as it got me interested in how cultural notions form people’s behavior. In my bachelor thesis, I described how users of the social media 4chan in their treatment of conflicts caused by trolling did not express or strive for traditional political correction or a cynical distance. On the contrary, they expressed an attitude marked by rapid switching between irony and sincerity. After finalizing my bachelor thesis, I wrote an exam paper for supplementary studies at the Danish School of Media and Journalism, regarding the Danish far-right party Stram Kurs and how progress among voters in the 2019 Danish general election-polls was a result of social media functioning as entertainment platforms, where the boundary between ironic humor and information is vaguely defined. I interviewed pledged voters, major candidates, as well as experts in digital culture. I concluded that traditional news media were increasingly getting outcompeted by social media news-media, leading to increasing provocation and the tone becoming more aggressive, as entertainment value was gaining greater importance than political substance, due to the said developments in media. During these two exams, I became curious about what I thought was a developing reaction on social media against a specific form of irony. At the time, I could not fully comprehend this type of irony, but I identified it in both pop culture and everyday communication, both online and offline. This led me to study irony, then the

literary and social manifestation of postmodern irony, and later the reaction against postmodern irony, known as post-irony. I felt that I finally had found a term that might be used to describe this developing reaction I had observed. However, the term post-irony mainly had been used as a concept related to fiction, and it had yet to be explored as a social manifestation, using anthropological theory. Hence, I got the idea of writing a thesis that illustrates post-irony and its manifestation on social media.

This thesis aims to explore an anthropological view of a topic that has not previously been addressed in the discipline, the topic of post-irony. Furthermore, it aims to contribute with an empirical picture of life as it is lived and experienced in a social media context, that of VRChat. Throughout this thesis, these empiric data will be related to the subject of love in chapter 5 and to the subject of suffering in chapter 6. It should be noted that I will not be introducing an anthropological theory of love and suffering. The reason that I relate my empiric data to the subjects of love and suffering is that the subjects of love and suffering were the ones that manifested themselves most clearly throughout my fieldwork. The subjects of love and suffering are being used as means to demonstrate the workings of post-irony and its manifestation. For ease of clarity, the empiric data in this thesis will be presented similarly to that of screenplays, a narrative format. I believe that much of my empiric data have similarities to that of screenplays and could be understood as an echo of Hastrup's notion of "the social" itself as a performative space, a notion which will be described in the next chapter (Hastrup 2004). Nevertheless, it is important for me to stress that I will not be pledging to the dramaturgical theory that "social life is a theater", as that is not the core of the argument that will be presented throughout this thesis. The thesis will contribute an anthropological perspective to the broader discussion regarding developments that can no longer be described as postmodern, and some scholars have named metamodernism or post-postmodernism (Vermeulen and Akker 2010) (Andersen 2007: 25). This paper will not be discussing the postmodernist condition¹ as a whole. Postmodernism is a wide-ranging term with many sets of ideas. This paper will only be using theory discussing irony as a feature of postmodernism to put it into contrast to post-irony.

¹ Lyotard, whom scholars consider an initial herald of postmodernity, and a skeptic of modernism, describes the postmodern condition as the sense that "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (Lyotard 1979: 27).

Research question

What is post-irony, and how does it manifest itself on social media?

The problem statement is two-sided, and it will be answered as such. First, I will define post-irony. Secondly, I will describe its manifestation on social media, specifically the visual- and auditory- virtual social world VRChat.

Chapter 1 - Theoretical approach

This chapter deals with the theoretical foundation of my thesis. First, it introduces Geertz's thick description to argue for the relevance of incorporating concepts from literature to clarify meaningful connections between life experiences and literary text. It will then introduce Stewart's way of presenting narratives in her work and emphasize how the creation of a vocabulary for understanding narratives is possible through the introduction of etic perspectives from anthropology and other disciplines, as well as the use of emic perspectives, as it will be exemplified through texts of Throop, Rapport, and Dalgaard. It will then exemplify the utility of concepts related to fiction in the anthropological analysis through Handler and Segal and, once again, Rapport. I will then be presenting scholar's and author's descriptions of how irony is involved in postmodern irony, leading to the introduction of post-irony. I will then end the chapter with a short section describing the rationale of presenting my empiric data in the form of screen plays, a narrative format.

Thick description

Geertz reminds anthropologists that what anthropologists do is first and foremost to write (Geertz 2017 1973: 19). He describes culture as a "collective fiction" (Ibid.: 10). He introduced the concept of thick description, which he conceives as the task of ethnography, "What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (Ibid.: 9-10). The concept of thick description thus incorporates the notion that "culture" is not a force that holds together separate social phenomena but rather the term for an imagined social context that can be understood through thick description (Ibid. 14). The purpose of the thick description is to demystify what takes place within a social context, compared with merely observing and describing isolated facts, which he calls a thin description (Ibid. 16). Geertz believes that the purpose of ethnography is to "guess" a social context through cultural analysis, the meaning of which manifests through sociality (Ibid. 19-20, 23). He describes ethnography as both fieldwork and textual elaboration, and he articulates the relation between them, writing, "The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted" (Ibid.19). He found it applicable to examine culture as a collection of texts, as an imagined cohesive world built out of social materials that need to be systematically explored. He described this way of examination in his study of the Balinese cock-fight,

“The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong”. (Ibid. 448-449). He further clarified the notion of understanding culture as text, in his understanding of Levi-Strauss's travelogue “Tristes Tropiques”, which he described as reminiscent to a modernist poem, writing, "It is a classic example of the book whose subject is in great part itself, whose purpose is to display what, were it a novel, we would call its fictionality; a painting, its planarity; a dance, its comportment: its existence as a made thing" (Ibid. 28). Thus, his thick description introduces the anthropologist to a technique for uncovering the multiple systems of meaning operating in a given culture, i.e., by reading the culture as a text. He describes that it is the same vein as reading a manuscript, which he calls “foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior. (Ibid. 10). In sum, thick description thus emphasizes how culture can be perceived as a form of text. The historical context of a literary text is entangled with its present social context, as underlying norms and conventions are not fixed but vary with time. Therefore, I believe such an approach as the thick description makes it relevant to incorporate concepts inherited from literature, with the purpose of clarifying meaningful connections between life experiences and literary texts, to understand both cultures as a text and ethnography as a genre. In this thesis, it will be done through the introduction of the author's and scholar's concepts related to post-irony as a reaction against postmodern irony, including additional literature related to both the subjects of love and suffering and the terms sincerity and irony. The following section will first describe how narratives are used as objects for anthropological analysis, then how these narratives are presented through emic/etic perspectives. It will then exemplify the utility of concepts from literature to explain social phenomena.

Narratives and the incorporation of emic/etic perspectives

Using narratives as the "object" of anthropological analysis has been a commonly used approach in diverse sets of well-known anthropological works. How this article orders the empiric data gathered throughout my fieldwork in VRChat is influenced by Stewart's way of presenting narratives, as described in her book “A Space on the Side of the Road”. Stewart describes narratives as a mediating form through which "meaning" must pass, catching up on cultural conventions, relations of authority, and “fundamental spatiotemporal orientations” in what she defines as “the dense sociality of words and images” (Stewart 1996: 29-30). She explains that narratives create a space for "uncaptured excess that provokes further questions, new associations that just come, and fresh gaps in understanding" (Ibid.).

Stewart argues that the "truths" are the storied sensibility of culture performed and imagined in precise practices of retelling (Ibid. 9). Handler and Segal similarly argue for an ethnography "that enables dialogue between alternative, and sometimes contradictory voices and perspectives" (Handler & Segal 1999: 137). In this thesis, I will introduce narratives regarding the subject's love and suffering found within my fieldwork in VRChat, with the subjects being introduced to as means to understand post-irony and its manifestation on social media. Creating a vocabulary for understanding narratives can include both the introductions of etic perspectives from anthropology or other disciplines and the use of emic perspectives, meaning perspectives that come from within the culture where the narratives are situated. One such example is Throop, whose analysis of a father's narrative regarding her daughter whose arms were hurt in an accident introduces theory from pragmatics. In the father's narrative, he introduces the emic term *athamagil* to explain how his daughter "had to" endure the pain (Throop 2010: 244-245). In his analysis, Throop suggests explaining *athamagil* as a generational virtue for the people of Yap (Ibid. 253). He did so by introducing Ochs's pragmatic notion of *indexical makers of cultural virtues*, an etic notion, understood as utterances or signs that point to a broader system of what constitutes the good person and good life in a given culture. (Ibid. 2010: 237). Another example is Rapport, who introduces etic sociologic theory. He is also an example of an anthropologist who includes themselves in narratives, describing their own inner thoughts and actions. In his text about 'winning the lottery', Rapport had to go through an awkward bureaucratic ritual where corporate con-men attempts to press him into a timeshare scam, which he refuses, ending with the promise of a TV set he never receives (Rapport 1997: 141-159). He later analyzed this narrative, introducing Goffman's theory of *Quasi total institution*, a sociological term incorporating the notion of an institution that aims to destroy self-esteem and program a person into a new character in the moral world (Ibid. 160-163). Dalsgård exemplifies using an emic perspective to create a vocabulary of understanding narratives. This is done in her narrative analysis regarding an occurrence during what she calls a "by-product of her fieldwork in Brazil", in which she misinterprets the sincerity of an informant who conned her for 1500 reais (Dalsgård 2017: 4-7). She analyses the episode through the emic term *decepção*, which some of her other Brazillian informants introduced to her in another context (Ibid. 14-15). She describes *decepção* as "when someone or something turns out to be less or worse than you trusted, the effect of it being disillusion or disappointment". She concludes that her "focus has been the *decepção* of the creditor, the retrospective disillusion when a friend is not a complete friend" (Ibid. 19). As it has been exemplified through the works of Throop, Dalsgård, and

Rapport, empiric data in the form of narratives can be analyzed through various means, though both etic notions such as *indexical makers of cultural virtues* and *Quasi total institution* and emic notions such as *athamagil* and *decepção*. Throughout this article, it will be highlighted how the etic term post-irony is a concept used by different authors and scholars to explain a reaction against postmodern irony.

The utility of concepts related to fiction

Scholars have previously described post-irony as a concept related to fiction, such as novels and film (Andersen 2007, Konstantinou 2012, Linstead & Collison 2005, MacDowell 2012). As in the section regarding Geertz, “thick description makes it relevant to incorporate concepts inherited from literature”. However, literature is a broad term that is conceived as any collection of written work. In light of scholars who define post-irony as a concept in fiction, I find it relevant to elaborate specifically on fiction and how concepts related to fiction can be used in anthropological analysis. Handler and Segal does so by reading the works of Jane Austen as a way in which to open anthropological theory to alternative strategies of narration, interpretation, and translation, inspired by Austen's narrative techniques which privilege multiplicity where any voice can call into question the ‘completeness’ of any other (Handler & Segal 1999: 2-17). Thus, Handler and Segal propose that the literary techniques of Jane Austin are relevant regarding understanding distinctive ways of communicating. Rapport describes the field of literary anthropology as exploring different kinds of genres of expression within a social context and how they can have historical specificity, a cultural evaluation, and social institutionalism attached to them (Rapport 2012). He argues that literature and anthropology are 'corresponding ways of writing social reality and exemplify how the writing of E.M.Forster caused him to come to a deeper understanding of his anthropological experiences in the rural English village of Wanet, "When I read E.M.Forster and I 'read' my informants in Wanet (their recorded words, their remembered faces, and movements, their imagined minds), therefore, and I juxtapose these readings against one another as I plan to do, list them side-by-side and zigzag between an understanding of one and that of the other" (Rapport 1994: 5, 22, 32). Rapport describes Forster as an exemplar of Geertz's writing vision, which enlarges the possibility of intelligent interaction between people (Ibid. 33). Thus Rapport's reading of Forster and its usefulness regarding the understanding of rhetoric, narratives, and stylistic technique, outside of literature², is similar to that of Handler and Segal. Similar to the examples of the

² Particularly village life in Wanet.

anthropologist's use of fiction as inspiration for understanding ethnographic data, much of my fieldwork has been done by thinking through and utilizing a particular articulated concept, post-irony, a term associated by scholars to the late American writer David Foster Wallace.

From postmodern irony to post-irony

Irony has been around formally since the ancient Greeks and developed a stylistic variety of modalities and particularities through the 16th to 17th century (Linstead & Collison 2005: 382). Rapport and Overing define irony as a “cognitive proclivity and practice”, and defines its meaning as “being at home ‘in a world without guarantees’ without an Archimedean point of reference or transcendental truth,” thus making way for one to become “prepared to explore ‘the tense truth of ambiguity’” (Rapport & Overing 2002 2000: 215, 212). They describe that irony embodies a “certain imaginative movement from the world(s) as is, a certain reflection upon the latter and differentiation from it.” (Ibid. 215). In the introduction of this thesis, I mentioned that Rapport and Overing describe irony as a “part-and-parcel of the process of structuration by which modernity reproduces itself and knows itself” (Ibid. 213). As stated above, Irony has been around for a long time. However, Linstead and Collison note that it was not until the early 20th century that irony became definitive of modern consciousness (Linstead & Collison 2005: 382). They describe how irony was embraced as a hallmark of the modern intellectual consciousness, distinctive of the highest critical sensibility, and briefly flourished as the dominant style of the “avant-garde critic, if not always the artists”, until with postmodernism³, it became the defining style of consciousness and expression (Ibid. 383). Postmodern irony is defined by De Mul as encompassing nihilism, sarcasm, and the distrust and deconstruction of grand narratives, the singular and the truth (De Mul 1999). Linstead and Collison describe how throughout the mid-1980, the abilities that people “have to read ironically” grew increasingly more sophisticated (Linstead & Collison 2005: 283). This was characterized by an increasing variety of forms of ironic kitsch, art forms that draw their audience into their performance, and the expanding interpretative repertoires available in both popular and high culture (Ibid.: 284). They further describe the postmodern irony of modern societies as inescapable: “At the present moment, it is impossible to do anything without irony - politics, sex, consumption, waging war,

³ There is no exact date as to when postmodernism and postmodern irony began. Geyh, in her work from 2003, proposes the concept of postmodernity as a historical category of postmodernism, which she defines a “historical period that stretches from the mid-1960s through the present» and is “marked by certain ‘dominants,’ the political, economic, social, cultural and aesthetic features that differentiate it from other eras” (Geyh 2003: 5)

watching TV, playing soccer – and there is always more destabilizing information available from the vectors of cyber society to keep us from taking anything too seriously in a world seemingly perpetually at, or in, play” (Ibid.). Vermeulen describes the issue so forth “To be sincere, at least today, is not a natural quality but a choice, a performance you know might be impossible to put on forever, but try and maintain as long as you can” (Vermeulen 2012). This overcoating of postmodern irony in society has been criticized by the late American author David Foster Wallace.

David Foster Wallace is highly influential regarding the development of the theory of post-irony. Wallace advocated for changing the tone in literature and television of his time, from postmodern irony to sincerity. In his essay *E Unibus Pluram*, he describes how the irony at the time of his writing, 1991, had become a cynical and destructive force, as it is directionless and uncommitted to anything other than the agreed-upon laugh (Wallace 2015 *1993*: 179). He describes irony and ridicule as “...entertaining and effective, and that at the same time, they are agents of great despair and stasis” (Ibid.). Wallace believed that this is a particular problem because, as transgressive dissidents previously used irony as a form of countercultural language, it was now absorbed into popular culture, which uses it to maintain the status quo. While being skeptical of the possibility of rebellion against what he defines as “an aura that promotes and attenuates all rebellion”, he tried to describe a new form of literary rebels in his essay, saying that they might emerge “as some weird bunch of ‘anti-rebels’” (Ibid.: 213). He describes them so forth; “born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic.” (Ibid. 213-214). He further states these literary rebels will risk disapproval, in the same way as those he defines as “postmodern insurgents” did, writing “The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism” (Ibid. 214). He states that these new rebels have to be willing to risk “the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the ‘Oh how banal’. To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of over credulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law.” (Ibid). In light of his description of literary rebels, one may be inclined to

think that his critique of postmodern irony was politically motivated. Therefore, it should be noted that Wallace never criticized from a political standpoint, and he has never publicly supported political movements. Instead, his post-ironic modus operandi may be related to a search for authenticity. Andersen describes the hunt for authenticity as a crucial component of post-irony (Andersen 2007: 110). He describes the starting point for this pursuit of authenticity as the self, and that in a sense, the self is also the hunt's target. Andersen further describes how post-irony represents a sentiment: the sentiment that the aesthetic experiments of postmodernism represent a loss of reality in literature and in culture as such, and as an antithesis to “the un-realization of reality” post-irony puts the material and irreducible reality on the agenda. He says that the need for a struggle against postmodern irony originates in a sentiment that postmodernism has related too superficially to the absolute seriousness of life, where post-ironic authors do not see themselves as being too sophisticated for a temporary acceptance of the sentimental, naive, and banal (Ibid.: 157). Concerning the post-ironic struggle against postmodern irony, Linstead and Collison describes that irony does not disappear in post-irony, as “fake lives are still fake after all”, which they argue is because our intuitive understandings of irony change, in the same way “being knowingly, sold short is not at all the same as being sold short” (Linstead & Collison 2005: 393)

Rapport gives a seemingly liberating view of irony, writing that “irony is part-and-parcel of this individual force which ‘insists on itself’ and proceeds continue to create and to live its own truth” (Rapport 2002: 17). In contrast to the anthropological articulations of Rapport, Wallace finds that irony, at least the postmodern irony of his time, had become deliberating. Wallace explains in an interview in 1994: “Sarcasm, parody, absurdism, and irony are great ways to strip off stuff’s mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it. The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, then what do we do? [...] All we seem to want to do is keep ridiculing the stuff. Postmodern irony and cynicism’s become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what’s wrong because they’ll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists. Irony’s gone from liberating to enslaving” (McCaffery 1994). In an interview in 1997, he describes society's entanglement in postmodern irony as the “sound of prisoners who enjoy their confinement“ and “the song of a bird who enjoys being in the cage” (Wilney 1997). He describes how postmodern irony had made it hard to discuss thorny issues “I think the people like my age and younger relate to irony,

which is largely unconscious and largely is used as a mechanism for avoiding some really thorny issues – I think that is toxic” (Ibid.). Wallace has criticized postmodern irony by portraying it in his fiction and essays. For example, in his short story “My Appearance”, he describes David Letterman, a popular TV show host, as cynical in his way of using irony to disguise conventions (or lack of quality) in popular culture and make viewers feel superior – you cannot criticize a lousy TV show, that itself acknowledge that it is a lousy TV show (Wallace 1989: 173-201). And in his previously mentioned essay E Unibus Pluram, he criticizes a misleading Pepsi advertisement that makes fun of itself for just being a misleading Pepsi advertisement in order to get the viewer to agree with the advertisement’s premise that the advertisement is *smart* and on the same page as the viewer, because the advertisement criticizes itself and the advertising industry, thus making consumers buy the product because the advertisement is “so hip”, that you cannot hate it (Wallace 2015 1993: 190-191). In his novel Infinite Jest, widely considered his magnum opus, he criticizes postmodern irony through the narration of his character Hal Incandenza’s personal suspicions regarding postmodern irony: “Hal, who’s empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic” (Wallace 2006 1996: 694-695). Konstantinou states that the post-irony of Wallace was characterized by his effort to decouple the academic and cultural association between metafictional form an ironic knowingness and cynicism (Konstantinou 2012: 90).

In short, post-irony is a reaction against a specific form of irony, postmodern irony, as it has so far been exemplified. I refer back to the introduction and my ambition of illustrating post-irony and its manifestation on social media. In this thesis, I will try to clarify the manifestation of post-irony on social media by relating my empiric data to the subjects of love and suffering as expressed in the VRChat. As previously stated in the introduction, the choice of love and suffering is due to the outcomes of my empiric data. I want to stress that I did not go into the field looking for empirical data related to the subjects of love and suffering. Once again, as stated in the introduction, I will not be introducing an anthropological theory of love and suffering. They are, however, subjects that raise questions related to sincerity and irony, thus making it possible to examine post-irony through narratives related to them. Throughout this thesis, I will be examining concepts of different authors related to post-irony and

postmodern irony, including additional literature related to both the subjects of love and suffering and the terms irony and sincerity. Chapter 5 regarding narratives of love takes inspiration from MacDowell's concept of *quirky* and his notion of "ironic detachment with sincere emotional engagements", described as part of the "post-ironic shift", while chapter 6 regarding narratives of suffering takes inspiration from Yurchak's concept *stiob* and Graham's notion of an ironic free-for-all leading to post-irony. It should also be mentioned that both of the chapters include ideas from the late Danish author Søren Kierkegaard. In Chapter 5, I will be presenting the ironic Johannes from Kierkegaard's novel "Diary of the Seducer", and in Chapter 6, I will describe Kierkegaard's notion of the ironic *aesthete* and *symparanekromenoi*.

Presenting empiric data as screenplays

Hastrup uses Shakespeare's theatre to describe the nature of social spaces and individual agency, describing the liminality of the acts within Shakespeare's theatre as comparable to social spaces where we "perform accordingly, and in the process, we qualify the space itself" (Hastrup 2004: 223-225, 233). Shakespeare's theater is described as a way to "critically explore the contradictions of society " (Ibid. 224). By thinking through Shakespeare's theater, anthropologists may become aware of emergent realities, not only predetermined structures and informants as neither autonomous nor "victims of a social system" (Ibid. 232). As mentioned in the introduction, this paper will be introducing empirical data from VRChat⁴ in the form of screenplays, a narrative format. This is done as ease of clarity, hereby avoiding many sections with "he said/she said", but also because it makes sense, as my narratives echo the notions of Hastrup Shakespeare's theater, similarly the notion of Vermeulen "sincerity of today as a performance", and Wallace's description of postmodern irony as "The song of a bird who enjoys being in the cage" (Hastrup 2004, Vermeulen 2012, Wallace 1997). As I stressed in the introduction, this is not done to argue that "social life is a theater", a dramaturgical theory. The theoretical foundation for describing "social life as theater" was pioneered by Goffman and described in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life". His theory incorporates the notion that social interactions are concerned with a mode of presentation to provide others with "impressions" that are in harmony with the "performers" desires (Goffman 1959: 17, 109-114, 240). It should, however, be noted that I do introduce an etic perspective related to the notion of performance, through the introduction of Butler's theory of gendered

⁴ I have chosen not to present the empirical data from danish *shitposting* groups in this way due to significant differences between how fieldwork was conducted on Facebook and VRChat, which will be described in Chapter 3 regarding the preliminary fieldwork on Facebook.

performance to analyze a heated argument in one of my narratives, an analysis which I will then contest with another perspective, that it's not an issue of gendered performances, but rather that contemporary postmodern irony has led to people becoming skeptical of performances of suffering

Chapter 2 - Methodological approach

This chapter will describe the methodological approach of multi-sited ethnography through Marcus and Fisher. It will then introduce digital ethnography through Coleman and present Pink et al.'s principles of digital ethnography, which I will describe in relation to my fieldwork and the writing of this thesis. I will then discuss my disagreement with Miller's notion of anthropologist's rejection of unmediated authenticity and, in the light of that, discuss concerns regarding veracity of informant statements during my fieldwork, and discuss my disagreement with Boellstorff's claim against the notion that "online worlds are ultimately predicated upon actual-world cultures". Moreover, I describe how I practically conducted fieldwork in VRChat using traditional anthropological methods and virtual reality⁵ hardware. The chapter ends with ethical reflections regarding my fieldwork.

Multi-sited ethnography

The following section will describe Marcus and Fisher's multi-sited research method, which has become an approach to digital ethnography and has influenced my fieldwork within the virtual world of VRChat. Marcus and Fisher describe how anthropology as a discipline has been significantly revised since the 1980s and how new anthropological methods have emerged whereby societies and cultures can be interpreted (Marcus & Fisher 1986: xv). Anthropologists began to discuss whether perspectives from other academic disciplines, such as philosophy and literary history, and technology, could be included in an ethnographic study and began to discuss whether new interdisciplinary methods could be developed for an anthropological study of an expanded, contemporary, and modern field. Marcus and Fisher are of the opinion that anthropology no longer aims to discover "new worlds" and translate the exotic into the familiar; on the contrary, it should discover "worlds" that are already familiar but not yet "understood" by the people for whom it is every day. (Ibid. Xvii). Therefore, during internal debates in the 1980s, they argued that anthropology should repatriate itself (Ibid. Xviii). However, later they thought that their idea of repatriation was too simple and binary. They concluded that many of the most interesting problems in cultural and social formations were not local but transcended any kind of cultural or geographical boundary. Therefore, they begin to argue that multi-sited ethnography would be a necessary conceptual basis as a strategy for modern fieldwork. For example, it could be investigated how cultural transformation takes place during the diaspora and migration, or one could investigate the "social

⁵ I will from now on use the acronym VR to refer to "virtual reality"

biography" of a commodity. Multi-sited ethnography is therefore characterized by the fact that any ethnographic study of a cultural formation in a given world system is also an ethnographic study of the system itself, and therefore cannot be conducted in the same way as traditional single-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1995: 96). In addition, Marcus and Fisher describe that a cultural transformation can occur in different areas instead of in a geographically and temporally delimited group. This is especially true in digital spaces, which roughly denotes an electronic space where humans and machines interact with each other. Marcus & Fisher mention, among other things, how cyberspace challenges local moral standards, ideas about identity and gender, as well as notions of what is a simulation and what is real (Marcus & Fisher 1986: xxv). Furthermore, they state that the method can be used in digital ethnography and whether it can, among other things, help illuminate the construction of socio-cultural communication, group identities, and phenomenological experiences within cyberspace (Ibid.). The emphasis is thus on tracing connections among seemingly disconnected practices rather than working within well-defined boundaries. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Marcus & Fisher's method, multi-sited ethnography, has become a strong approach to conduct an ethnographic study of social media. Sapach describes how it may be inquired that a specific virtual world is to be considered to be a place or field site but concludes that the study of a virtual world is, in fact, multi-sited (Sapach 2015: 9). She highlights this by stating that every player inside a virtual world is required to login into the game in order to participate and that every player's physical body is located in a separate location in the real world "with travel to, and immersion in, the virtual world" (Ibid.). I consider my fieldwork in VRChat multi-sited, not just because VRChat is a virtual world, with different participants in different countries, such as Sapach describes, but also because of the multiple ways in which I got to connect with my informants. I went into VRChat, knowing that the fieldwork might lead me to use other social media to connect with my informants. Indeed, this happened, as, during my fieldwork on VRChat, I was led to other social media to communicate with my primary informants, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Discord. Thus, multi-sited ethnography influenced me in the way that I saw it as an approach that could involve different social media⁶ during my fieldwork.

⁶ Similarly, to Pink et al. first principle, that of multiplicity, which will be introduced in the next section.

The study of the social media

Anthropologists in the 21. century have become increasingly interested in studies of prices of groups and communication via digital technology (Coleman 2010: 490). When we talk about our age as a “digital age”, this is related to the importance digital technology has had on our society, and not least because of the explosive development of the social interactive Web 2.0 (Ibid.: 489). The Web 2.0 concept is used to differentiate the previously static Internet pages from social media. A social media is thus incorporating user-based sharing of content in virtual spaces, such as text, images, and video. Characteristic of the Web 2.0 is thus, compared to previous electronically based means of communication such as the walkie-talkie, radio, T.V. and Web 1.0, is that it has connected ordinary people with each other through their access to a digital medium, the computer, and thereby created a connection that forms the structure of an electronic network that creates the possibility of reciprocity between peoples, across both national and continental borders - all of this being possible through social media. Coleman discusses the anthropological relevance of creating an understanding of the broader meaning of digital media, including that of social media (Coleman 2010). She emphasizes the importance of the study, which must involve various forms of analysis, historical awareness, and understanding of the experience of being part of a local and living context. A social media is a platform where different users of different locations can interact with each other (Miller 2016: 95). This thesis concerns an anthropological study of the social media VRChat, which can be defined as a virtual world. Boellstorff, in his study of *Second Life*, defined virtual worlds as “places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet” (Boellstorff 2008, 6). He makes the claim that “the virtual is the anthropological” and suggests that virtual technology is merely a new version of inherently human history, claiming “It is in being virtual that we are human” (Ibid. 29, 237). Various anthropologists have undertaken the study of virtual worlds. These include Boellstorff’s study of the *Second Life*, Yee’s study of *Everquest*, and Nardi’s study of *World of Warcraft* (Boellstorff 2008, Nardi 2010, Yee 2003).

Throughout my fieldwork and during the writing of this thesis, I was influenced by Pink et al.’s five principles of digital ethnography (Ibid. 8). I, therefore, find it relevant to discuss how the five principles were followed by first mentioning a principle and then discussing it in relation to my work. The first principle is multiplicity, which states that different methodological approaches are depending on the context. This was very relevant during my fieldwork. As it will be shown in my empiric data, I have used

other social media than VRChat regarding contact with my informants. The other social media that I have personally used to connect with my informants are Discord, an instant messaging service, and the social networking service's Facebook and Instagram. The second principle problematizes the idea of studying a medium that puts the medium itself in the center of the analysis, as it pays little attention to the ways in which media are part of wider sets of environments and relations (Ibid. 8-10). This was already an intrinsic part at the beginning of my research. I never intended to research social media as such, but rather how post-irony manifests on social media. The third principle is openness, which defines how the digital ethnography should focus on processual research, on collaborative research, and on collaborating across disciplines or social communities (maybe an informant can teach the anthropologist to use a social medium 'correctly?') (Ibid. 11-12). This was followed during fieldwork; however, that was more of voluntary choice than a principled necessity of being "open". At the beginning of my fieldwork, I had some technical problems using VRChat, and some of my informants have been very helpful to me, teaching me how to use VRChat. Regarding the processual aspect, this thesis, as stated in the introduction, is trying to "contribute an anthropological point of view to the broader discussion regarding developments that can no longer be described as postmodern" I consider empiric data, and my analysis of empiric data, as objects for future discussion. Therefore, I consider my work processual. The fourth principle defines how digital ethnography should be a reflexive practice that that one should acknowledge the collaborative ways in which knowledge made in the ethnographic process is produced (Ibid. 12-13). Pink et al. state that this can be regarded as an ethical practice, not different from "any other ethnographic chapter". I will end this chapter by discussing ethical reflections related to the fieldwork. The fifth principle is that works of digital ethnography are orthodox, which means that the dissemination of ethnographic data may take unconventional forms beyond "classic" or "visual" anthropology (Ibid. 13-14). I believe the principle of unorthodoxy has also been followed, as I decided to approach my collection of empiric data by recording sessions of my fieldwork in VRChat, characteristic of visual anthropology, even though this thesis does not show the video recordings.

Regarding the concern that mediated communication, such as that using digital devices should lead to a loss of authenticity, Miller describes that anthropologists reject the idea of "unmediated authenticity", regarding all subjects concerning identity and relationships as intrinsically mediated by cultural and social rules (Miller. 2016: 102). I would like to note that I do not share Miller's notion, as I don't believe

all forms of mediated communication are equally fit for providing relevant ethnographic data. I am of the opinion that online fieldwork is an accurate way of describing the lived and experienced the social reality of some informants. Nevertheless, I believe that there are qualitative limitations when during online fieldwork that is mostly textual (as will be explained in the next chapter regarding preliminary fieldwork conducted on Facebook in Danish shit-posting groups). My fieldwork in VRChat is qualitatively different from much digital ethnography, which focuses on written communication of informants, as I in VRChat converse with users verbally in real-time and watch users engage with each other using their *avatars*, while I am using a VR headset with an associated microphone and motion-sensing controllers that mimic hands. Thus, my fieldwork is more reminiscent of traditional fieldwork than that of digital ethnography, which depends on textual online spaces. In light of my disagreement with Miller, I find it relevant to raise concerns regarding the veracity⁷ of statements during my fieldwork. That is the issue, insofar that the informant may be lying or extravagating. Some accounts of my informants are impossible for me to verify due to the mediated nature of VRChat. However, this thesis is not about the veracity of my informant's statement. I am specifically looking at informants' statements to which degree they raise questions involving post-irony. The expressions that informants make regarding other informant's sincerity are similar to how I am situated as a researcher. Both I, as well as my informants, are blind to the actual reality of statements that are formulated. Informant expressions during my fieldwork in VRChat should be handled with caution, in the same way as informant utterances in other anthropological fieldworks should be handled with caution.

I would like to stress that this thesis is not inspired by Boellstorff et al.'s methodological approach to studying virtual worlds, who describe the study as being about "how virtual worlds come into being and change over time" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 19). I disagree with Boellstorff's claim that "online worlds are ultimately predicated upon actual-world cultures (Boellstorff 2008: 62). This thesis is about clarifying the manifestation of post-irony on social media. Thus, it was a presupposition for writing this paper that my virtual world of study, VRChat, was predicated on ways of sociality outside of VRChat, a necessary condition for sociality. I highlight Golub's critique of Boellstorff's statement, which he describes as an "exceptionalist position which overemphasizes the autonomy of Second Life from the actual world"

⁷ The problem with veracity is not only an issue in the study of social media. I remind the reader of the Mead-Freeman Controversy. Mead and Freeman had different understandings of the Samoa people's culture, with Freeman being convinced that Mead was duped by ceremonial virgins, for example her principle informant Fa'apua'a Fa'amua, who in his view fooled her by telling innocent lies about their private lives, which Mead reported as fact (Freeman 1989).

(Golub 2010: 23). The primary way my informants expressed themselves in the world of VRChat was by conversing about subjects that are not unique to the confines of VRChat. If my informants had to recount social experiences on VRChat, they would do that in parallel with a context outside of VRChat. The sociality of my informants was never confined to VRChat itself; for example, as previously stated, I would communicate with informants using different social media. Boellstorff did not study informants outside of Second Life, focusing only on their “in-game activity” (Ibid: 24). On the other hand, I was influenced by Boellstorff in his insistence on using traditional anthropological methods in his study of *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008: 6). Throughout the fieldwork on VRChat, I used the same anthropological methods that I have been taught to use outside the confines of a virtual world.

Conducting fieldwork in VRChat

This section will discuss how I practically conducted fieldwork in VRChat, without going into the technicalities of VRChat⁸. My fieldwork in the “virtual world” of VRChat has been conducted using traditional anthropological methods, such as unstructured and structured interviews, participant observation⁹, and field notes (Spradley 2000: 53-54) (Chiseri-Strater et al. 1997)¹⁰. Throughout my fieldwork in VRChat, which started as stated started on 8/7/2020, I have gathered over 355GB of video data, in the bitrate of 10, with 60 frames per second. Recordings of fieldwork within VRChat were made using the program *GeForce Experience Shadowplay*, a screen recording utility. The idea of recording video was inspired by Pink et al., who state that ethnographic writing in digital ethnography can be supplemented with video, photography, and blogging (Pink et al. 2015: 3). My material amounts to 104 hours of video, with the last piece of video data being from 27/10/2020. One of the many positive aspects of recording all of my fieldwork is the fact that I can always relive the memories of being in the field. I had tagged all videos with relevant keywords and fieldnotes concerning my research question, with this making me able to find the data I needed during this thesis's writing process. However, it should be noted that I turned off video recording during moments in which I felt it was unnecessary, for example, when watching a movie with an informant or if an informant specifically asked me to turn off video recording.

⁸ Technicalities of VRChat will be described in Chapter 4.

⁹ Throughout my fieldwork, I managed to come around Dewalt's paradox of participant observation stressing the emotional involvement contra objective observation (Dewalt et.al 1998: 62). Participant observation was never “total”, as I would mostly spend up to four hours a day during the fieldwork, even though my informants would stay within VRChat for many more hours. By asking relevant question in relation to my research question about post-irony and its manifestation on social media, and taking fieldnotes, I managed to generate some distance between me and my informants.

The fieldwork was conducted primarily¹¹ using virtual-reality hardware connected to my computer. I used the VR headset *Oculus Rift*, which I wore on my head to simulate the feeling of being inside my character, and its motion-sensing controllers *Rift Touch*, which I held in my hands to simulate the sensation of having hands within VRChat. This gave me the sensory experience of actually being in the field, embedded¹² inside the visual and complicated social world with my informants, due to the technical nature of VR and social nature of VRChat, once again making this fieldwork more akin to traditional fieldwork than that of digital ethnography that is merely confined to textual online spaces.



VR headset *Oculus Rift* and motion-sensing controllers *Rift Touch*, which were used throughout my fieldwork on VRChat. 30/05/2020

Ethical reflections

Throughout my fieldwork in VRChat, I have experienced social phenomena and communication that is controversial. Therefore, I will discuss the epistemological and ethical challenges this leads to. It may be that readers find some of the material in this paper offensive. However, the inclusion of the controversial material in this paper is meant to give an unbiased and unfiltered view of the informants. Nothing was included to harm or insult any group or individual intentionally nor to shock readers. This paper includes, for example, an informant who told me that he is a child and that he is regularly sexually abused, moments in which informants threaten suicide, informants confessing to drug-related crimes and encouraging others to engage in drug-related crimes, and cases of informants using language abusive towards racial and sexual groups. Thompson et al. state that no guidelines detail how digital ethnographers can actively declare their research interests to the participants they are studying (Thompson et al. 2021: 679). They also describe that it is problematic if “digital ethnographers are too strict in adhering to researcher

¹¹ Sometimes I started feeling very dizzy, after having worn a VR headset. Thus, if I still wanted to continue fieldwork, I would change to using my desktop computer.

¹² I want to stress that this article will not explore phenomenological considerations related to doing fieldwork in VRChat because it is not relevant to my research question. The reason for this fieldwork is to clarify post-irony, not a media-centric study of the experience or interpretations of spatiality within a virtual world. Thus, my research complies with Pink et al. previously described the second key principle of digital ethnography as being non-media-centrist (Pink et.al 2015: 9)

transparency, it disrupts the flow of interaction”, but they also raise the issue that no adhering to research transparency could lead to “the risk of unethically exploiting their participant”. I have adhered to research transparency by informing key informants that I was conducting a research project, that I was recording them, and that their usernames could be identified. Furthermore, Thompson et al. note that standards for studying vulnerable populations ethnographically online are generally lacking (Ibid.: 677). They propose that the issue of online vulnerability should be considered as a continuum, where the blurring of online/offline lives can increase the potential negative consequences and the scalability of potential risk and harm (Ibid. 678). Regarding the issue of vulnerable informants, whom I have deemed unable to consent, I have decided to anonymize their usernames¹³¹⁴. Due to the mediated nature of the VRChat, it is impossible for me to intervene in the lives of my informants who may be in vulnerable situations, in the same way as an anthropologist could do during fieldwork outside the confines of mediated spaces aka. “in real life”. It should be noted that I try to deescalate tense emotions and be empathic towards informants who express anguish, even though methods of conflict management is not something in which I have been trained, and it probably does not have the same effect on VRChat, as if I stood in front of an informant outside the mediated nature of VRChat. When informants threaten to commit suicide and hurt themselves, I tried to comfort them and remind them of the good things in life.

¹³ Specifically, the informants Boviscopophobia, Limbic_system and Piecake who will be introduced in Chapter 6. These are fake usernames that I have invented. In the narratives I state that they go by these usernames. That is only done for clarity.

¹⁴ I only use the first name of users during the section on preliminary fieldwork, instead of the user’s full name, due to my suspicion that the users of danish *shitposting* groups may be underage, thus unavailable to give informant consent.

Chapter 3 - A preliminary fieldwork

Otto and Bubandt describe contextualizing as “locating descriptions of particular phenomena within a wider setting that throws light on these phenomena” and that contextualizing is about “grounding data; about methodological, literary, and political circumspection” (Otto & Bubandt 2010: 1). They describe contextualization as necessarily coming from the hermeneutical tradition and an important part of a holistic perspective. They describe that holism is understood as the need to describe things and events in their cultural and social context, exemplifying with reference to the visual anthropologist Heider, that holism is a “reminder of the importance of allowing the camera to capture ‘whole bodies, whole interactions, and whole people in whole acts’” (Ibid. 6). Some, such as Tsing, use the term “worlding” to define a kind of contextualization, which she describes as “the always experimental, partial, and often quite wrong, attribution of worldlike characteristics to scenes of social encounter” (Ibid.: 24). All anthropological works are necessarily embedded in an interpretive framework, i.e., contextualization. This thesis is about post-irony and how it manifests on social media. In the previous chapter on “Theoretical approaches,” I described post-irony as a reaction against a specific form of irony, the postmodern irony. In this chapter, I will contextualize the question of post-irony through a possible more familiar setting¹⁵, where the informant's expressed sentiments reminiscent of postmodern irony. This is done with the previously defined notion of Geertz in mind, who proposes that an anthropologist guesses a social context (Geertz 2017 1973: 19-20, 23). I will therefore introduce preliminary fieldwork¹⁶, which I conducted on Danish *shitposting* groups on the social media platform Facebook, between 15/06/2020 and 30/06/2020. The fieldwork helped me shape my understanding of postmodern irony, in contrast to post-irony. The problem statement for the preliminary fieldwork was the same as the one of my primary fieldwork in VRChat. At the time, I wanted to focus on danish youth culture, especially the Gen Z generation-defining people born between the mid-'90s and early 10's. I wanted to do the fieldwork on Danish *shitposting* groups on Facebook, which I presumed was a form of a hotspot for Gen Z'ers. *Shitposting* is a term described by popular media as a form of trolling that defines a certain user behavior and rhetoric on forums and imageboards (such as 4chan) that is done with the purpose of derailing a conversation (Klee 2016). *Shitposting* group has been featured in Danish media such as BT, with

¹⁵ I propose that the setting is possible familiar, because the preliminary fieldwork took place on the social media Facebook, at the time of writing this thesis the most widely used social media. (Statista 2021)

¹⁶ Preliminary fieldwork is one an anthropologist conduct, to more closely examine their role, social location, and relationships in a community prior to undertaking formal research (Caine et al., 2007).

sensationalist headlines such as "Girls mercilessly exposed on secret Facebook group: 'Who want to see Cecilie suck ...?'" And "Young women willingly share scantily dressed photos of themselves in 'Ghettoen'" (Jensen 2019, Nesheim 2019).

Before going into the field, I thought that there was a correlation between *shitposting* and post-irony in how these youth communicated. However, I instead learned that the term *shitposting* is used in many different contexts and understood in many different ways, as it will be shown. There are four reasons why Danish *shitposting groups* did not become my main field, which I find relevant to highlight as these can be seen in contrast to my *hopefully* successful fieldwork in VRChat. The first reason is the problem with the qualitative nature of the text-based Facebook medium, in contrast to the almost out-of-body experience of being embedded in the VRChat world. I learned much more by conversing with users verbally in real-time and watching users engage with each other using their *avatars*. Sometimes my informants would take hours to answer my written questions, and sometimes they would just ignore me. It was much more fluent in talking with users on VRChat because I felt like the people behind the computer screen/VR headset were right there with me. At the same time, covid-19-epidemic was rampant. Therefore, VRChat was, at least for many of the people I talked to, the only way for social engagement. However, it should be noted that while VRChat was the primary way of my engagement with informants, I also used other social media, as stated in chapter 2, with inspiration from Pink et al.'s first principle of multiplicity in methodological approaches when conducting digital ethnography. The second reason was that when I did the fieldwork on Danish *shitposting groups*, all the way into the beginning of my fieldwork in VRChat, I had a rigid binary understanding of social action. I wanted to categorize users, defining them as either heterodox/orthodox categorizations (heterodox, as the transgressive and ironic, and the orthodox ones, as the non-transgressive and non-ironic). However, after doing fieldwork in VRChat for a while, I came to see the weakness of using this form of binary categorization, as I have come to believe, during my fieldwork, that forms of behavior are not static. Sometimes people want to act sincerely, and sometimes they want to troll; sometimes they troll because they are sincerely sad and have no other way to express that sadness. The third reason was that I realized that I found it rather futile to do an anthropological generational study with Gen-Z as the subject. Gen-Z may be a group of people within a struggle against postmodern irony, but this is not an inherent part of their generational behavior. The fourth reason I ended up concluding the fieldwork on *shitposting groups*

was that the work I had conducted in those 15 days did not lead me closer to answer my research question. I did not find a correlation between how the Danish youth *shitpost* and post-irony strong enough for me to write a serious answer as to why *shitposting* should be understood through the lens of post-irony, and there for a manifestation of post-irony on social media. Hopefully, this section will help to show empirically how contemporary ironic communication manifests itself, thus contextualizing the framework for my research question regarding the manifestation of post-irony on social media.

Fieldwork on Danish *shitposting* groups on Facebook

On 15/6, I made posts on the most active self-defined *shitposting* groups of *Dåsen* and *Ghettoen* (as of 14/8/2020, *Ghettoen* has been removed from Facebook), requesting to interview users in these groups, writing in danish: “Do you know about the phenomenon of *shitposting*? Maybe you are *shitposter*? What are "kran" and "slide"? Do you know of Facebook groups like *Dåsen*, *Ghettoen*, *Huset*, *Øen*, *Bananplantagen* and *Bumsefarmen*? Then I would like to talk with you! My name is Morten. I am a graduate student in Anthropology (it is about culture, etc.) at Aarhus University. I am trying to conduct an academic study of *shitposting* culture in Denmark. Help me learn about *shitposting* culture! You can be anonymous, go under a pseudonym, or whatever. And you even get a statement of consent, so you can be sure that your statements are treated properly! Throw in a PM and be part of the future of *shitpost* research articles.”



The post on *Dåsen*. 15/08/2020

At first, some thought I was joking. A guy called Kristoffer even wrote a post on the group saying, “LOL, imagine studying *shitposting* at Aarhus University” (it should be noted that I afterward ended up

¹⁷The mentioning of *Huset* twice in the post was a typographical error.

interviewing Kristoffer). However, to my surprise, many people wanted to talk with me. I got bombarded with messages, both on my post, and in private messages, by people wanting to interact with me and answer questions. That included both administrators of the page and regular users. Most of the *shitposts* on *Dåsen* and *Ghettoen* seem to be either questions, statements, or internet-memes¹⁸. An example of a question could be “What ‘role’ do you think the person above you plays in school” where each user reply to another user post above them, usually in one word describing their assumption about a user’s school-trope by looking through their profile. I got named “Spørge Jørgen” (Inquisitive Jørgen). An example of a statement was when Liv did a post describing herself as a feminist. Her post got many replies. However, the majority of the replies to the post were only one word. Some wrote “disgusting”, without any clear indication of whether they were ironic, others tried to articulate an opinion related to political notions, and there were even a few posts saying, “we don’t care”.

Interviews with the shitposters

I did ten written interviews focusing on what it means to engage in *shitposting*: five female and five males (the gender divide was a coincidence). The interviews differed in length. The informants were young, with the median age being 16. Some informants, especially females, wrote well-articulated long responses to my questions; others made short-form responses. As stated before, *Shitposting* as a way of communicating is generally interpreted in the mainstream media as a form of trolling. However, I learned that *shitposting*, for at least for the Danish youth I interviewed, was a very arbitrary term. Rebecca is an active user of *Dåsen* and *Ghettoen*. She describes *shitposting* as “you put the so-called ‘irrelevant posts’ on *shitpost* groups and help to make the *shitpost* culture more widespread”. Kiara, another user of *Dåsen*, thinks the same, “*Shitposting* says a bit about itself in the word, ‘shit,’ i.e., ‘trash/shit’ and then -posting. That is, you put up all sorts of shit just to put shit up. It is to get attention and get higher up in the rank of the group you do it in”. The admin. of *Ghettoen*, Christian, says that “*shitpost* is just a term for posts that are irrelevant and only for entrainment / to be irrelevant”. Alberte from *Dåsen* writes that she *shitposts*: “to express what I do. My thoughts and feeling”. Kristoffer is a self-defined troll and *shitposter* on *Dåsen*. He writes that the reason for his *shitposting* is, “To be completely honest, it is just about the amount of interaction, the ‘comments’ and ‘likes’. I live to get that ‘comment count up, homie, that is the only thing I love”. Liv, a user of *Dåsen*, writes, “there can also easily be serious questions in *shitposts*.”

¹⁸An internet meme is a modification of humorous images, videos, or catchphrases (Coleman 2015: 43)

However, how seriously a user answers the *shitpost* varies from person to person; some answer sincerely and honestly, while others just think it is a joke and try to create awareness for themselves”. Two of my informants felt that *shitposting* in the groups had recently have become more “toxic”. Rebecca writes that *shitposting*: “has become about postings things that are either demeaning or downgrading to others”. Liv writes: ”it has just become something where you can write something you are proud of, and then various people come to pick on you, for what you are proud of. If you do not have a perfect look or the perfect body, then you will most likely end up getting bullied; if you have had sex, you are a whore, and if you have not had sex, you are a loser. People just cannot figure out how to talk nicely to each other anymore, and every time you say that ‘this is not fun anymore’ or say “please stop”, it gets worse, because then they think that you are a loser because they think that because it is a *shitpost* group, then they can say what they want, even if it hurts people. ‘If you cannot stand what is being said, you must leave the group, this is all about is *shitposting*’ – they say - which I personally think is totally wrong, since you should be able to be in various *shitpost* groups without having your self-esteem and mood ruined”. She thinks the reason why people behave “toxically” is “in my opinion, based upon what I have seen and experienced, I think they do it to have fun. So they have a good time and fun as they scold others”. One of my informants thought that *shitposting* in Danish *shitposting* groups was not real *shitposting*. Sulèiman writes, “what's going on in these Facebook *shitposting* groups is not *shitposting*. Calling something a ‘*shitpost*’ is just a bad excuse to write things you don't stand for because everyone knows that what you do would otherwise be mega *cringe*¹⁹, but if you say ‘it's just a *shitpost*’, you become almost immune to critique.”

Shitposting as a manifestation of postmodern irony

The empiric data in this chapter demonstrates the term *shitpost* as rather arbitrary. The term is exemplified as being used in a *shitposting group* as a justification for bullying as described by Liv writing about “every time you say that ‘this is not fun anymore’ or say ‘please stop’, it gets worse, because then they think that you are a loser because they think that because it is a *shitpost* group, then they can say what they want, even if it hurts people”. It can be used as a form of attention-seeking for, as described by Kristoffer, “To be completely honest, it is just about the amount of interaction” or self-expression “to express what I do. My thoughts and feeling”. express what I do. My thoughts and feeling”. Moreover, it

¹⁹ *Cringe* is a slang used to indicate someone/something that may evoke feelings of awkwardness, embarrassment or pity (Know Your Meme 2021a)

can also be used as a way to defend oneself from criticism, as described by Suleiman, “if you say 'yeah yeah it's just a *shitpost* ', you become almost immune to critique”. I have come to believe that the contexts in which the term *shitposting* is used in this *shitposting groups* were much more reminiscent of postmodern irony, for example, as described by Wallace, “irony, which is largely unconscious and largely is used as a mechanism for avoiding some really thorny issues”, than of anything related to post-irony (Wilney 1997). Therefore, I did not wish to continue the fieldwork due to the idea of *shitposting* not being compatible with the issue of the shortcomings of irony in postmodernism. *Shitposting* in the context of Danish *Shitposting* groups was, as stated before, a term with rather arbitrary meanings, depending on whom I interviewed, which did not stand for anything other than the term itself when used in a context outside conversations with informants. This preliminary fieldwork thus exemplifies how the concept of *shitposting* is a way in which postmodern irony manifests itself, using the terminology of Rapport and Overing as a ‘part-and-parcel of an online experience, which many users in Denmark are embedded in. The users of Facebook *shitposting* group's online experience became an emic indicator of the experience of postmodern irony, which helped me develop a notion of which sentiments to follow during my fieldwork in VRChat, that could possibly lead me to answer the question of the manifestation of post-irony.

Chapter 4 - The virtual world of VRChat

After my preliminary fieldwork on Facebook, I wanted to find a social media reminiscent of a virtual world. I searched for a virtual world because I wanted to communicate with users verbally instead of through the mediated textual nature of Facebook. I wanted to be entangled in diverse forms of social activities, conversations, and plays. Furthermore, I wanted a virtual world that was not overly moderated, not confined by possible limitations due to steadfast rules about proper social behavior²⁰. Then I found VRChat. VRChat is developed by VRChat Inc. This makes it possible to enter into social relationships that are more reminiscent of relationships outside the internet. VRChat is accessible through the website vrchat.com and its client service Steam. On the Steam page, the developers of VRChat state in the description of the game, “Join our growing community as you explore, play, and help craft the future of social VR. Create worlds and custom *avatars*. Welcome to VRChat” (Steam 2021). Users can connect to the virtual world of VRChat through Steam or vrchat.com, using either a desktop computer with keyboard and mouse or use a VR headset, which can be supplemented with other VR technology such as motion-sensing controllers. The primary way a person may be identified in VRChat is through their username, which, by default, appears in a box floating above the head of that VRChat user’s *avatar*. In VRChat, the user can be represented by various *avatars*, without restrictions on what these should represent. The *avatar* serves as a visual representation of a user that enables a user to move through visual spaces and socialize with other users who also rely on *avatars* to interact and communicate. As stated before, VRChat is a visual- and auditory- virtual social world. The primary way of communication on VRChat is verbal through voice chat²¹. Through the use of VR technology, such as the previously mentioned motion-sensing controllers and VR headset, communication may also involve the use of body gestures, which thus provides additional ways of interaction. The game has a wide variety of users, and statistics indicate 12.5 million estimated users registered, with 1.3 million active players (PlayTracker 2021). I registered my VRChat account on 8/7/2020. I decided to take the username Simulacrum96²². Each user within VRChat has a *user menu*, which they can access in-game. Inside the *user menu*, there are functions that the user of VRChat can use.

²⁰ There are official rules regarding proper behavior on VRChat. However, during my fieldwork I never saw any anyone getting banned for unproper behavior.

²¹ There are no rules regarding language on VRChat. But, as my empiric data shows, I conversed in English with users.

²² As I’ve previously stated, the empiric data will be narratives presented as screenplays. In these screenplays, the username Simulacrum96 will refer to me.



The user menu from my point of view in VRChat. 01/06/2021

I will be describing the functions *avatar*, *emote*, *social*, and *world*. The *avatar* function is used to change one's *avatar*. The user uses the *avatar* function to access the *avatars* that one has obtained. Throughout my fieldwork, I primarily²³ used an *avatar* of a giant bird.



A stylistic image of my VRChat *avatar* was photographed by my informant Blobby. 10/08/2020

The *emote* function can be used to change the animation of an *avatar*, for example, playing an animation of the avatar dancing, crying, or cheering. The *social* function is used to see the list of friends that the user has added²⁴ within the game, each with an icon that includes their screen name underneath an image of the *avatar*. As of 31/05/2021, I have 77 users on my list of friends. The *world* function shows a list of different visual worlds within the game and lets users connect to them. The term *world* is also commonly used to refer to visual spaces within VRChat. Both users and developers of VRChat can create *worlds*. At the beginning of my fieldwork, the *worlds* function was my primary way of finding areas to engage with informants. Using the *worlds* function, the users can also favorite a *world* and hereby make it their *homeworld*, which is the place where the users will start in the virtual space once they log-on VRChat. It is also possible to favorite specific *worlds* if the user wants to revisit them quickly. The primary *worlds*

²³ For example, I used another *avatar* for hugging the bee (that in the next chapter), because the bird *avatar* lack of hands.

²⁴ In game, you can point at users to either add them as friend (making them appear on your list of friends), block them (making a user disappear from your point of view when inside VRChat), or mute them (making them appear silent to you in-game).

in which the narratives presented throughout this thesis take place are that of Summer Solitude and The Black Cat.

Summer Solitude consists of a suite in a high-rise building as well as its rooftop. It starts with the user spawning outside an elevator. Walking on, you realize that you are inside a luxury suite on top of the high-rise. I observed how people hung around the suite's living room before heading up to the rooftop. On the rooftop, you may sit at the bar table and converse with users while looking at the beautiful cityscape.



The rooftop of Summer Solitude 04/08/2020

The Black Cat is formed like a pub. Users in there can sit at bar tables and converse. I've spent a long time listening to conversations, drinking with those who wish to get the feeling of being inside a real-life pub during the corona pandemic (and then losing their drink, because they are using a VR headset), and listening to musicians playing their music through their microphone.



Inside the main hall of The Black Cat. 06/08/2020

Chapter 5 - Narratives of love within VRChat

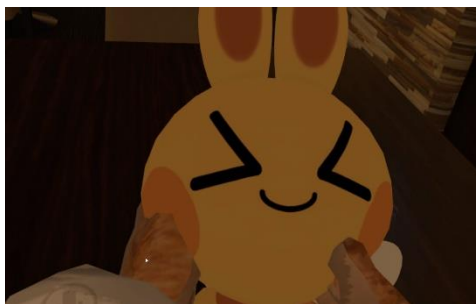
This chapter will deal with narratives regarding the subject of love within VRChat, as expressed by informants. I will discuss the subject in relation to *emic* phenomena's *personal mute* and *VRChat Marriages*²⁵. Love is a structuring of social interaction by means of affective appreciation of individual others (Rapport 2018: 142). My empiric data shows informants engaging in daily activities with each other reminiscent of those found in between loving couples outside the confines of mediated virtual worlds, such as watching movies, cuddling, 'hanging out', and sleeping together. This chapter will clarify how the informant's expression of love is characteristically post-ironic due to a typical switching from irony towards society, both in the informant's actions and utterances. To create a vocabulary for understanding this switching, I have taken inspiration from MacDowell's concept of the *quirky* film and his notion of "ironic detachment with sincere emotional engagements". MacDowell defines *quirky* as a contemporary comedic sensibility that is intimately bound up with the tonal combination of ironic and sincere sentiments. He gives a written example of this phenomenon within in film: "A film may shift in an instant from detached artifice to an intense emotional invitation; it can allow the faintest glimmer of sympathetic engagement to emerge from beneath an otherwise mocking attitude; it might build towards a sense of allegiance with characters who knowingly open themselves to mockery and so on." (MacDowell 2011: 21-22). He argues that *quirky* films contain "the anxiety, that sentimentality is somehow a 'risk' is not often merely disregarded, but rather is implicitly embedded in the work itself." (Ibid. 22). He contrasts *quirky* film to *smart* cinema, a notion from Sconce associated with how postmodern irony manifests in film. Sconce defines postmodernism being "the feeling informing smart cinema and its audience" and smart cinema being "... as a dark comedy and disturbing drama born of ironic distance" (Sconce 2002: 358, 352). MacDowell explicitly places the notion of *quirky* films inside the dialogue with broader movements in the 1990s and 2000's U.S. culture, the post-ironic shift away from postmodernism's irony and cynicism. He refers to Morris analysis of young American poets within the new sincerity-movements, which Morris defines as a movement that views postmodern irony as "the main event of modern poetry", and post-irony as driving "toward a kind of sincerity [which] also seems aware it is always already arriving too late" (Morris 2008). As it will be shown, a sentiment related to MacDowell's notion of *quirky* can be spotted in my informant's expressions. The next section will start

²⁵ Both phenomena's will be described in this chapter.

by discussing the concept of *Personal mute* and then lead into a narrative of a love triangle between three of my informants.

I was followed by a bee

Personal mute denotes the silent role in a virtual interpersonal relationship involving two users on VRChat. *Personal mute* may become a companion of a regular user of VRChat. The *personal mute* has none to low verbal activity, while the user whom the *personal mute* follows has regular verbal activity. Furthermore, the *personal mute* usually wears an *avatar* invoking a feeling of cuteness. An active user of VRChat describes them so forth; "They're not pets! It's a mutual agreement. You are the voice of the mute, and you give the mute attention. They are silenced beings who can't speak, and in return, they give you love, affection, and simp content²⁶. It's mutual bonding, not bondage. You can't fuck your mute" (roflgaptor 2021). I first got to know about this phenomenon on 21/7/2020. On that day, I had been listening to a musician playing music through his microphone. Sometimes in between the sets, I would interview the musician playing. As I did this, I was trailed by a user wearing an *avatar* reminiscent of a bee from some children's cartoon. This bee-clad user only communicated with me by enthusiastically saying, "hug me", with a highly pitched voice. It would not stop requesting hugs until I started hugging it using my motion-sensing controllers. Then the user's bee *avatar* would use the cheer *emote* and look happy.



Me hugging the user with the bee *avatar* using my motion-sensing controllers at the VRChat concert. 21/7/2020

My VRChat informants Blobby and Fifty congratulated me on what they defined as my own *personal mute*, calling him "Simulacrum's *personal mute*". I thought they were ironic, so I replied by laughing. Over the next couple of days, the user wearing the bee *avatar* would join me in whatever *world* I was on, following me, and keep requesting hugs until I would hug it. It was not too much of a hassle. When I

²⁶ *Simp* is a contemporary slang for someone who looks for female affection in an embarrassing way (Paul 2020)

conversed with other informants, we would just ignore it if it tried to get my attention. Eventually, after some days, the user would stop following me around. Maybe it got tired of being ignored during conversations? Or maybe it found a new user to follow around?

Triangular with the personal mute

22/07/2020 - DESCRIPTION:

A day after my experience with the bee, I got to befriend a female²⁷ with the username Bo. When I met her, she would use change between two *avatars*, the first one being reminiscent of a ‘cute’ mushroom and the second one being reminiscent of a ‘cute’ anime girl with emojis on her dress. Like the Bee, she would just follow me around; however, she would also communicate using body gestures using the previously mentioned motion-sensing controllers. On 23/07, Bo dropped into a movie *world* with me and two informants Blobby and Fifty, watching *Deadpool 2*, which led to her getting to know my pals. She would later end up in a relationship with both of them, first with Blobby and then Fifty. Both Blobby and Fifty would feel a strong emotional connection. She would follow them around, never saying anything, however hanging out, playing games, watching movies, and getting hugged by them, even engaging in simple text-based conversations through Discord.



Bo is sitting on Blobby's lap, with Fifty standing behind them. 26/07/2020

25/07/2020 - DISCORD CHAT:

Blobby writes to me via Discord.

²⁷ I refer to Bo as female, because my informants Blooby and Fifty refer to Bo as female.

BLOBBY

The mushroom is in love with me, bro.

BLOBBY

She followed me around till I would give her cuddles, then we played some horror game worlds, omfg.²⁸

25/07/2020-01/08/2020 - DESCRIPTION:

I would regularly join Bo, Blobby, and Fifty in different *worlds*, seeing them watching some cheesy Hollywood movie, then I would leave after chatting with them for a bit. Fifty would be friendly towards both Blobby and Bo, acknowledging their relationship. Blobby would privately message me about his admiration for Bo and how he had been "stalking" her. He told me that he had found her YouTube channel, that she had told him that she was Taiwanese and disliked her strict Taiwanese parents. Furthermore, he told me that she had sent one picture of herself to him where "she looked tiny," which he found adorable. On 1/8, he messaged me, "I guess Bo is my only prospect at the moment now lol". One time, while Blobby and I were watching some South Park, I asked him what he found so attractive in a girl who lived so far away from him in Arizona. He stated that he "felt a connection with her" and that he did not feel so alone when she was "following him around". Unfortunately, something went wrong.

03/08/2020 - DISCORD CHAT:

Blobby writes to me via Discord

BLOBBY

I think the whole cute thing me and Bo had is over lol²⁹ I think she got sick of me or something.

²⁸ Abbreviation for the sentence "oh my fucking god"

²⁹ Abbreviation for "laugh out loud"

SIMULACRUM96

Did anything happen? I am sad to hear that.

BLOBBY

I don't know, a couple of days ago, she was trying to stay up to hang out with me and listen to just music,

BLOBBY

And today, she seemed, like, super disinterested in me.

SIMULACRUM96

If I have learned anything about you doing our time on VRChat, then it is that you got mad charms. So do not let it get you down; there are many girls, not just from Taiwan, that want to cuddle with you in VR.

04/08/2020 – DISCORD CHAT:

I write to Blobby via Discord

SIMULACRUM96

What's up, man.

BLOBBY

I'm good, just been chilling.

BLOBBY

Bo just joined me too, lol, but I'm kinda sleepy lol maybe I'll go hit up some energy drinks.

SIMULACRUM96

30-year-old fat dudes from Taiwan are shy, my guy. [I am joking]

BLOBBY

Honestly, you might be right.

SIMULACRUM96

Well. It would be pretty sick if my joke is right, lol.

BLOBBY

I kinda think what changed that she wasn't into it. [Referring to their relationship]

BLOBBY

To be fair, I just sent her a pic. She didn't ask to see my face.

I join Blobby in his VRChat world for further elaboration. I kept on being compassionate with Blobby, as he was very hurt by her lack of interest after sending the image, saying about this situation: "She probably thought I was a creep."

04/8/2020-14/09/2020 - DESCRIPTION:

I tried to spend an equal amount of time with the three of my informants because of my interest in how the relationship between them would develop now that Bo and Blobby had broken up. I realized that Bo started to hang out more with my informant Fifty, doing practically the same stuff as she did with Blobby, watching movies, cuddle virtually, hang out, and such. She would even write to me on Discord asking "where is Fifty" when Fifty wasn't online. However, their relationship ended a month later.

15/09/2020 - DISCORD CHAT:

I write to Fifty via Discord

SIMULACRUM96

Yo. Sorry for not having been online for a while [I had taken a break from engaging with these three informants for about a week], but I will join you now.

FIFTY

Man, I am hyped to see you.

FIFTY

I've got lots to tell.

SIMULACRUM96

I am hyped to see you too, homie.

15/09/2020 – AT THE BAR:

I joined him in a world called Drinking Night, where he is hanging out with some other users, playing a virtual drinking game of some sort called "never have I ever". I participated, and we played for a while, while I drank beers in real life as I conversed with him and the other players. At one time, he asked to speak with me more privately. We go to a corner in the world where we assume that nobody can hear us nor disturb us.

FIFTY

You want to hear the breakup story between Bo and me?

SIMULACRUM96

What? Did you break up? I am sorry to hear that. Please tell me. I already heard Blobby's story, so tell me yours as well. [I tell him clumsily, as I am drunk in real life]

FIFTY

Yeah, she had become like.

(Pause)

FIFTY

My girlfriend.

FIFTY

She was calm, but then like she starts being a weirdo, even buying a new computer just to play some other games than VRChat with me.

FIFTY

She would text me [on Discord] all the time and ask questions such as "when are you coming on VRchat", "why are you playing this game, instead of VR.", "why are you talking with that girl".

FIFTY

That was more like E-Jail than E-Date.

FIFTY

She hadn't even sent a fucking picture of herself to me. AND WE WERE IN A RELATIONSHIP. [he shouts]

He did, however, admit that he had got one picture of her face while he apparently had sent her many. He also revealed that she told him that she did send a picture to Blobby when they were together, a picture which was not of her but of one of her friends. This made Fifty think that the picture he got of her might as well have been of someone else. Now, continuing the conversation

FIFTY

She was so fucking mad when I broke up with her.

SIMULACRUM96

How did you even come into a relationship, to begin with?

FIFTY

We started to talk more sincerely each day.

FIFTY

We started acting like a real relationship.

SIMULACRUM96

I've seen you flirt with girls before, wasn't that sincere?

FIFTY

No, that was just for fun.

SIMULACRUM96

Tell me the difference between that kind of fun flirting and sincere flirting.

FIFTY

Sincere flirting is like talking with someone for a long time, and even though you haven't seen her face, you trust that person, you grow closer to her, heart to heart.

SIMULACRUM96

So, what is fun flirting?

FIFTY

That is kind of like doing ironically, like: "what's up babe, you want to suck my cock", you know what I mean? Sexual conversations. That are meant for fun. You know?

SIMULACRUM96

Come on, man. No way that you have sincere feelings for Bo. You didn't actually fall for Bo, did you?

FIFTY

Bro, I did grow close to her.

SIMULACRUM96

What did you like about her then?

(Pause)

FIFTY

She was cute in texting. She was always there for me. If I was depressed or something, I guess she would be there for me

SIMULACRUM96

So, what did you guys write about?

FIFTY

Relationship stuff.

FIFTY

However, most of the time, she couldn't understand what I had to say, I would talk clearly and slowly, and her only text was like, 'yeah.'

FIFTY

I can't even communicate with her, so why would I date her?

We later get into the topic of relationships. He states to me that he thinks that "trust is more important than communication, but communication is second". I also asked about her avatars, whether the "cute"

mushroom and little anime girl made him like Bo more. To this, he answered: "I did think it was cute, but also a little weird that she kept using them, I tried giving her a normal-looking avatar, but she refused."

Love entangled in irony

As it has been shown in the above narrative, in VRChat, one might find users running around in the *worlds* acting as a *personal mute*, using, for example, a *bee-avatar* and inquiring about hugs, in the words of the previously referred VR wiki leading to “love, affection, and simp”, both for the *personal mute* and the user engaging with the personal mute. One might even find flirting has become ironic, thus leading to ironically exaggerated vulgar flirting, exemplified in the words of Fifty; “what's up babe, you want to suck my cock”. Thinking through literary works may help us gain an understanding of these particular ways of socializing. In different literary works, the idea of love as entangled in irony is not a unique phenomenon. The danish playwright Johan Herman Wessel has satirized the classic French tragedy, which commonly describes struggles of love, in his play *Kærlighed uden Strømper* (Love without Stockings). Wessel satirizes his idea of the superficiality of the expression of love in the classic tragedy of the 18th century through his character Mads, a scorned suitor who sings a tragically inspired, overdramatized melancholic aria about his sadness of not being able to get the lover he wants³⁰ (Wessel 1901: 71). A less cynical view of love is found in Jane Austen's 19th hundreds novel “Pride and Prejudice”, which starts out with the cynic sentiment that “people delude themselves by thinking wealthy bachelors inevitably need and desire wives” (Handler & Segal 1999: 120-122). However, throughout the novel, the bachelor Mr. Darcy, who at first insults the woman Elizabeth as a woman not pretty enough to tempt him to dance, ends up falling in love with her, thus disproving the cynic sentiment at the beginning of the novel. This is ironic, as it contradicts the previous notion about wealthy bachelors. Handler & Segal, in their reading of Austin, defines this as a parody of an aphorism, a somewhat dubious statement that undercuts itself through excessive certainty, and suggests that this parody of an aphorism becomes what Bakhtin defines as double language (Ibid. 116). Double language appears in the expressions of Blobby. His awareness regarding the absurdity of being in a relationship on VRChat is apparent to some degree, agreeing with my joking ironic statement that Bo might be a “30-year-old fat

³⁰ “On the chimney of my heart burns a resinous fire of love, which is lit at both ends, the god of love lit it. Who the smoke sees rising (my aria is the smoke) must think, if not say: it is hot from where it came.” (Wessel 1901:71)

dudes from Taiwan”³¹ by replying, “honestly, you might be right”. However, he also states that he "felt a connection with her" and did not feel so alone when she was "following him around". Thus, the double language manifests in how Blobby expresses his awareness of the possible fake nature of his relationship with Bo; however, he still chooses to engage. Blobby is may thus exemplify the ironic nature of love.

The superficiality of modern love

This section will introduce the emic term *pickup* to introduce Giddens’ theory of modern confluent relationship and Goode’s notion of romantic love, and then discuss these two etic concepts in the light of the expressions of Blobby and Fifty. In 2011 one of the most popular YouTube channels was Simple Pickup (Lu 2011). The channel was devoted to videos of a trio who ostentatiously approach a woman to get their telephone number, i.e., *pickup*. The primary audience of Simple Pickup were young men looking for ways to approach a woman for potential sex and/or relationship. The seduction of women by scheming like *pickup* is not a new phenomenon. Back in the 19th century, Kierkegaard wrote the fictional diary *Forførerens dagbog* (Diary of the seducer), which contains the accounts of Johannes, whose seduction of the seventeen-year-old Cordelia shows his scheming mind and calculated madness (Berthold 2011: 149). For example, concerning kissing, he constantly regards this as a method which is to shape Cordelia into an object worthy of his seduction (Ibid. 150). Poulsen describes Johannes as having a fundamentally ironic approach to the world (Poulsen 2016: 84). She refers to Kierkegaard writing that we should understand the sentence “know yourself” as “separate yourself from the other”, believing this underlines the importance of individual subjectivity, and points out the risk of isolation for the individual who relies on absolute irony (Ibid. 85). She concludes that an ironist’s relationships, like those of Johannes, are characterized by an unbalance because he simulates ignorance and never unfolds himself (Ibid.). The ironic approach of Johannes, and Simple Pickup, which tutors young men to engage women for sex and relationship through scheming, is reminiscent of Giddens’ description of modern confluent relationships. Giddens has argued that modernity has to lead to romantic love being rapidly displaced by a series of confluent relationships each entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another, and which is continued only in so far as it is estimated by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it (Giddens 1992: 58). As defined by Goode, romantic love is one that is culturally constructed though it may or may not be based

³¹ In another conversation on VRChat, not exemplified in this narrative, Blobby told me that he was aware that he was possible being *catfished*, a contemporary term meaning to lure (someone) into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona (WebMD 2021)

on human impulses (Lindholm 2006: 10). Lindholm describes that it is often assumed that this notion of love is based upon the assumption that the “Western ideal of romantic love serves primarily as a socially acceptable reason to engage in sexual intercourse”. However, Lindholm exemplifies theory that dispute this, that challenge the notion of Goode’s romantic love as uniquely as modern and western, but rather sociobiology, which believes that “romantic love must necessarily appear in all human societies, and search for it beneath the welter of cultural variation” (Ibid.). However, confluent love, in contrast to romantic love, is based upon modern forms of relationships-making based on individualistic values and the free choice of friends and partners rather than the imposed relationships³² (Ahearn 2002). Ahearn describes that these modern forms of relationships are also gaining influence transnationally, even in traditional societies; for example, in the Papua Huli community or among Chinese in Hong Kong and Singapore, ritualistic earlier rituals based on the “exchange of women” have to be reformulated to embrace modernity (Ibid.). Lindholm describes this modern view of relationship making as “Gone is the passion and idealization of romance; they have been replaced by placid 'pure relationships' consisting of the pleasurable reciprocal exchange of fluids and feelings” (Lindholm 2006: 6). My narrative shows that Blobby and Fifty show an affinity for sincerity while still acknowledging the superficiality of modern love and relationship-making. Fifty, for example, states that he engage in the form of sincere flirting with Bo and describe that sincere flirting “is like talking with someone for a long time, and even though you haven't seen her face, you trust that person, you grow closer to her, heart to heart”. However, he still uses terminology related to modern confluent relationships, making remarks reminiscent of Simple Pickup videos by stating, “what's up babe, you want to suck my cock”. My informant's utterances about connections, feelings, trust, and growing close, however, may indicate something reminiscent of previous notions of passion and idealization of romance in contrast to the superficiality of engaging in an ironic *pickup*. Neither Blobby nor Fifty expressed any sexual desire or lust regarding Bo³³.

Sincerity minus communication

In reference to my narrative and the previous section, I think it's fair for me to imply that Blobby and Fifty both had sincere feelings for Bo. Not even my ironic, mocking statements, implying that she was not real to Blobby, and telling Fifty that he could not be serious, made them change their statement.

³² Marriages are in modern society based less on contract and more on emotional/affective ties (Ahearn 2002).

³³ At one point, not exemplified in the Narrative, Blobby called his relationship with Bo “platonic”. However, that was post break-up.

Maybe some guys just long for someone to give them emotional support, as reported by Fifty when he "was depressed", by just looking at them with a comforting but slightly confusing smile all day, every day? However, that would reduce their need for Bo to the need for a household pet, or Tamagotchi, which I do not think is the case. A study in relationship satisfaction and its predictors for those who simultaneously maintain committed relationships, in both real life and in virtual worlds, with either the same or a different partner, was conducted in 2012 by Kolotkin et al. in assistance with Minnesota State University Moorhead, through the online virtual world Second Life. The research team decided to approach those who indicated in their in-world profiles (a technical feature within the game, publicly accessible self-description) that they were in a "partnered" Second Life relationships (an in-game declaration appearing on a profile similar to a proclamation of marriage in real life) (Kolotkin et al. 2012: 14). The study concluded that there were not only commonalities between virtual and real-life relationship satisfaction but that there are also unique properties in virtual love that distinguish it from real-life satisfied love (Ibid. 20). One of the more peculiar findings in the Kolotkin et al. study, which the researchers reported as an apparent anomaly, was the notion that communication did not emerge to be a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction for the women interviewed within Second Life as part of Kolotkin et al. research, in their real-life relationships (Ibid, 21). They further argued that this was an abnormality by referring to research that shows communication as highly important to participants in real-life relationships, conducted by Anderson & Emmers (Ibid. 17) (Anderson & Emmers 2006). They argued that their finds might be unique to relationships in immersive, virtual social worlds. They concluded that the reason is that in Virtual Worlds, "all there is to do is to communicate" and that communication is not just a part of a relationship but defines it totally (Ibid. 21). However, they did acknowledge that these conclusions reflect areas of potential future research. Regarding Kolotkin et al. study of virtual worlds, which concludes that communication is not just a part of a relationship, but defines it totally, contradicts my empiric data. This is apparent through my conversations with the above informants and the general concept of Personal Mute (as stated by Roflgaptor, the Personal Mute "give you love, affection, and simp"), which both differ from Kolotkin et al. conclusions. Both verbally (Fifty seeing "trust" as more important than communication, Blobby defining Bo's as being in love with him by following him around) and non-verbally (Bo actively engaging in companionship with users whose language she couldn't understand, primarily using bodily language and only engaging in simple text chat), my informants indicate that communication may not be the crucial presupposition in a relationship,

among users in VRChat. My finding indicates that my informants are rather uninterested in the potency of communication. They still engage with each other, even though some like Fifty still question whether this form of engagement is possible in the long term, "I can't even communicate with her, so why would I date her?". Love is understood ironically, but engagement persists, like Blobby stating, "I feel a connection with her". The catalyst for engagement may be an attraction to someone dressing up as a cute bee or mushroom who engages in non-verbal actions such as following one around. The personal mute may seem like it is mocking you. At least I thought so when I was being followed by the user with the bee-*avatar*. However, later on, it may lead to sympathetic engagement, seemingly reminiscent of *quirky films*, leading to the post-ironic phenomenon of "ironic detachment with sincere emotional engagement". Referring back to the introduction of *Personal Mute* at the start of this chapter, I guess I can now conclude that Blobby and Fifty weren't ironic

Post-humanist sensibility against the nonhuman ironic self-reflexivity

This section will discuss a sentimental post-humanist understanding of Wallace's concept of "humanness" in relating it to *personal mute*. Giles defines Wallace's understanding of humanness to not be a simple relapse into "sclerotic humanism" but rather the search for fragments of an authentic personality "amidst the razzmatazz of scientific jargon and hip-hop slang" (Giles 2012: 335-336). Giles's reading of Wallace involves the relation between Wallace's sentimentality (his post-irony, though not defined as such in Giles's text) and post-humanist sensibility. Giles reads Wallace as an expansion to the posthumanist cultural landscape that goes beyond "the narrow technocratic circle of the cyborg manifesto"³⁴. Instead, he shows how "a posthumanist sensibility has filtered into the everyday consciousness of American life", which suggests that posthumanism can wear many different faces (Ibid. 330). Again I draw attention to my notion of *personal mutes*, such as Bo (and also my bee follower, for that matter) as not being a soulless Tamagotchi's. Today, there exist commercial products that motivate and improve the social skills of people, that are reminiscent of the ways in which Blobby and Fifty express their liking of Bo, such as the Paro robot seal and the Replika chat robot (Hung L 2019) (Ta et al. 2020). The "sclerotic humanist" may argue that these are not human because they lack the ability to communicate. As exemplified through Tomasello's evolutionary anthropological criteria for human communication, which demand that human communication incorporates four criteria, joint attention,

³⁴ Referring to Haraway's essay.

signing in an interpersonal relationship, collaborative motivation, and the understanding of a common goal in subsequent joint action (Tomasello 2008). Paro and Replika might be closer to this, but they are not there yet. In the case of the personal mutes I have followed, they both engage in joint attention (watching a movie, cuddling), engage in mutual signing (expressing a need for cuddling), collaborative motivation (express need for cuddling), and understanding of common goal (it is nice to cuddle; therefore we cuddle). However, just as in the case of Paro and Replika, they might be close but are not there yet. Thus the “sclerotic humanist” may argue that these are not human. However, as I will argue, even though they may not be people, they may incorporate a form of human reality, even more, authentic than some humans, due to their lack of ironic self-reflexivity.

Staes, in his article related to narrative approaches of empathy in the works of Wallace, introduces the novel “The Marriage Plot” by Jeffrey Eugenides, which he claims as featuring a protagonist who “might be inspired by Wallace” (Staes 2012: 412). Discussing the relation between Wallace own critique of the lack of “deep convictions or desperate questions in literature” and Staes own understanding of the moral usefulness of Wallace, he describes the protagonist Madeleine in Eugenides novel as “a student [referring to when the protagonist was a student] in the 1980s Jacques Derrida becomes a campus ‘god,’ Madeleine is confronted with the assumption that novels should no longer be “about” anything, and she realizes that the cynical detachment that was once obscure but critical has now become mainstream hype”. In Wallace's own short story “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”, this way of engaging in enforced ironic self-reflexivity is also exemplified by how the characters communicate with each other. In the novel, the character Mark Necht is an aspiring writer who wants to make a story that “that stabs you in the heart”, but he does not have the ability to do so (Wallace 1989: 333). Timmer argues that Wallace’s story is a study of cultural settings and cultural practices, including the practice of constructing a sense of self, through the introduction of “postmodern ideas and assumptions” (Timmer 2010: 104). Kelly argues that what Wallace is commenting on in the story is an underlying issue, being a struggle which concerns “the relationship of theory to history in a late-postmodern era or post-postmodernism age” or, as I define it in this thesis, post-irony being a struggle against postmodern irony (Kelly 2011: 414). The lack of humanness that is characteristic for a society entangled in ironic self-reflexivity is further exemplified by a scene in the book in which Mark does not wish to engage with Magda, due to his cynicism: “Mark and Magda both look at the field and scarecrow and all-business Illinois rain like

people who are deprived. Magda feels an overwhelming—and completely nongranular—compulsion to talk to somebody. Mark, a born listener, right from day one, feels nothing at all” (Wallace 1989: 346). Introducing Wallace theory of humanness to the phenomenon of *personal mutes*, it may be that *personal mutes*, like robot seals, Tamagotchi’s and chat robots, may express something necessary for humans, regarding their empathy, more than the enforced ironic self-reflexivity of Derrida scholars in Eugenidas’s book or the ironic self-reflexive cynicism of Necht in Wallace book. I think Fifty and Blobby may represent a withdrawal from previous forms of nonhuman ironic self-reflexive towards a posthumanist post-ironic humanness. Let me clarify. For Fifty and Blobby, neither of them found language to be the most important factor in a relationship, as exemplified in Fifty, stating “trust is more important”. What mattered for them was the humanness of Bo, even if it is only an imagined form of humanness. Blobby “felt a connection with her” and Fifty “I did grow close to her”. Giles, states concerning Wallace’s humanness that there are “...articulate ways in which the human consciousness responds to its environment by internalizing local scenes and harnessing the self-centered nature of being as a way of mapping itself onto the wider world”. Being in VRChat, at least for Blobby and Fifty, may at least in part be caused by a post-ironic sense of being. I consider this post-ironic sense of being to be a longing for humanness in a posthumanist sentimental sense, different from the superficial nature of nonhuman ironic self-reflexivity, characteristic of postmodern irony. The next section will present the emic phenomenon *VRChat marriage*.

Do you want to marry me? Yeah, why not

Throughout my fieldwork, I have met many users who found their partners through playing VRChat. Talking with users who had found their partner on VRChat, I learned of the phenomenon *VRChat marriage*. Contributors to the fan-made VRChat Wiki describes the phenomenon so forth; "Marriages in VRChat are in some ways similar to marriages in real life, uniting two (or more) people in some way, but that is usually where the similarity ends." (VRChat Wiki 2021) One such person who married in VRChat was the user Vio_The_Insane, whom I interviewed about marrying and keeping up with his partner through the use of VR technology.

07/10/2020 - DESCRIPTION:

I was hanging out at a virtual bar *world*, The Black Cat, with some pals. At one time, I talked with my informant Fifty, mentioning something about my home country of Denmark. A rabbit clad in a very

skimpy outfit suddenly asked me where in Denmark I was from. His name was Vio_The_Insane. I told him I was from Herning, and he replied that he was from Vejle. This got us talking about VRChat. I told him I was playing VRChat as I was conducting an anthropological study. This got us talking, and we discussed my research so far. At one point, I asked if I could interview him. He said, "Yeah.". I asked him whether he uses VRChat as relief from daily life to *shitpost* or uses it for serious conversations.

VIO_THE_INSANE

I don't do the *shitposting*³⁵ thing. I owe everything to VRChat, as I found my partner here.

VIO_THE_INSANE

I've had lots of different serious conversations though here, as my partner and I live in different countries from each other and can't see each other due to the ongoing COVID epidemic.

SIMULACRUM96

How did you guys meet?

VIO_THE_INSANE

It was inside some generic world where I was the loudest, and this got my partner interested in me.

We talk about their meeting, and at one point, he mentions to me that he'd even gotten married to his partner on VRChat. That happened a few years ago during what he defines as the "VRChat marriage trend".

³⁵ I had told him about my fieldwork on Danish *shitposting* groups. I had defined *shitposting* as a form of trolling. Therefore, he might have been influenced by my understanding of the word *shitposting*. What he is telling me may be that he doesn't engage in trolling.

SIMULACRUM96

How did you marry on VRChat? It sounds rather unusual compared to real-life marriages.

VIO_THE_INSANE

He asked me, “Do you want to marry me?”, probably inspired by others marrying in VRChat, and I was like, “Yeah, why not?” and then we just started talking to each other every day.

However, his relationship didn't just keep within the confines of VRChat, as it evolved into something in real life

VIO_THE_INSANE

After six months of us talking, I asked, “Should we give this a go?” and he told me, “If you want an answer, you should come to see me”, so I booked a plane ticket that week and went to him in the Netherlands next Friday

He told me that they had only seen each other twice but that it feels real when they see each other on VRChat using VR technology. He tells me that they generally spend all their time together and that they even sleep together, lying down physically in real life and within the VRChat world, using a webcam and VR headset, and motion-sensing controllers in the form of hands and leg accessories

SIMULACRUM96

Do you think using all these cool VR technologies to engage with your partner is comparable to being with your partner in real life?

VIO_THE_INSANE

I don't think it [VR technology] will replace real-life, but I truly feel this is a great opportunity for people like me in long distant relationships to flourish, instead of the relation dying.

Before VRChat, you couldn't really be together.

Marriages within online worlds

I would like to introduce Yee's ethnographic study regarding marriages in virtual worlds before I, in the next section, start analyzing the above narrative regarding VRChat marriages. Marriages, and as previously demonstrated, relationships within virtual worlds, are not uncommon phenomenon. Nor is it unusual to indicate ironic detachment to such a social phenomenon. In 2003, Yee wrote: "An Ethnography of MMORPG Weddings" (Yee 2003). Quantitative data included in the study indicated that about 10% of male players and 33% of female players had tried to marry online within an MMORPG³⁶ world. About 1% of male players and 10% of female players had married more than once. The data also suggest that most players feel that getting married online is silly and that male player were more likely than female players to think that getting married online is "silly". Yee decided to explore this data through qualitative interviews with informants within the MMORPG game Everquest. One informant, K.B., reports a marriage with her in-game mentor going by the username Terrorix, which took place once Terrorix gave her a virtual silver rose quartz engagement ring. Even though she found in-game marriages "bizarre," she would spend 10 - 12 hours online together with him and knew various things about Terrorix's personal life. Yee argues that "a virtual wedding is a combination of social entertainment, extensive roleplaying and sometimes political intrigue. Instead of thinking of a virtual wedding as the corrupt bastard child of a real-world contractual agreement, the virtual wedding should be considered as an elaborate form of collaborative digital story-telling, a ritual of its right that fulfills a completely different purpose." (Ibid). This qualitative data was further explored by Silverman et al., who argues that virtual marriages, but also mentorships and friendships, become unintentionally functional in generating positive social bonds between players beyond the simple sharing of game defined goals and become ways of carving out forms of sociality from the otherwise amorphous tangle of encounters and interactions (Silverman et al. 2009). Assumptions about the sincerity of VRChat marriages do not seem to differentiative much from Yee's data on Everquest marriages, as will be exemplified in the interview. Contributors to the VRChat wiki also confirm this; "Getting married in VRChat is mostly a pretend

³⁶ MMORPG is acronym for "massively multiplayer online role-playing game"

arrangement that might last just a couple of seconds to months or (very rarely) years. Being an in-game-only thing, it is best not to take a VRChat wedding too seriously" (VRChat Wiki 2021)

The post-ironic expressions of love

As discussed in the previous section, virtual worlds have created ways of engaging in rituals such as marriage by transforming them into possible ironic roleplay. While it may be easier to roleplay a marriage within cyberspace, to avoid all the limitations that such a marriage would have outside cyberspace, no matter if those problems should be financial or cultural, what is actually happening is that the couple is becoming rather redefining the marriage ritual, in regard to how they see fit. Marriage is not just something they play, as exemplified through Vio_The_Insane's utterances on VRChat and Yee's informants on Everquest. The users behind the screen do become sincerely attracted to each other, and they keep on chatting with each other daily, even though there is an ironic distance to it because "it's weird." Vio_The_Insane told me that his relationship with his boyfriend might have started thanks to an ironic roleplay regarding marriage on VRChat. He told me that marriages on VRChat were prevalent a couple of years ago, which might have inspired his new partner to inquire about marrying him. Vio_The_Insane indicates it was thus the trend that led to the marriage. Through this ironic roleplay, their relationship developed into something in the real world. While this may be defined as another example of how love is entangled in irony, I would like to emphasize that the switching from ironic roleplay to a real relationship is compatible with the theory of MacDowell and the post-ironic *quirky* sensibility in films that "shift in an instant from detached artifice to an intense emotional invitation" (MacDowell 2012: 21-22). The way they keep up their relationship today is through VRChat. The technical possibilities caused by innovative VR gadgets lead to their relationship flourishing, even though the participants in the relationship live in different countries. Thus, the VRChat Marriage was the catalyst for a sincere relationship between the two due to the ironic action of marrying in a video game and the unironic sincere need for love and companionship.

Considering the previous views of postmodern irony, as it is expressed by Linstead and Collison, Vermeulen and Wallace, it may be that the banality of the search for love is being shamed upon so hard by a society entangled in postmodern irony, that even mentioning that you are emotionally engaged is frowned upon, therefore leading to a post-ironic expression of love. My empiric data indicate that my informants within VRChat are reacting against the superficiality of modern love but are still using

terminology related to the modern concept of confluent relationships. They seem to have no words to express a form of romantic love. However, my informants are still aware of how contemporary society is entangled in enforced ironic self-reflexivity due to postmodern irony. The habit of postmodern irony leads them to express love in seemingly vague terms as they do not want to appear pathetic. They perceive it as being more socially acceptable to appear like Johannes from the writings of Kierkegaard, who has a fundamentally ironic approach to the world. This may lead to informants engaging in ironically exaggerated vulgar flirting, reminiscent of that of YouTube *pickup* artists, or getting married virtually as part of an ironic trend. The expression of romantic love is mostly found embedded ironically, with users such as Fifty's described Bo as "weird" for having used a mushroom *avatar*, Blobby agreeing with my ironic statement that Bo is a "30-year-old", and Vio_The_Insane's marriage starting out as ironic roleplay. However, sincere engagement now and then is expressed. Fifty, after all, defines his relationship with Bo as sincere, stating, for example, "bro, I did grow close to her", Blobby was still hurt over his breakup with Bo even though he indicates that he was aware that she could be fake, and Vio_The_Insane's ironic marriage leads to a relationship in the real world. This switching from irony to sincerity is reminiscent of the contemporary comedic sensibility in *quirky film*, which are part of a post-ironic shift. My findings indicate that informants' actions and utterances express a longing for humanness as defined by Wallace, a humanness that Giles defines as a form of post-humanist sensibility. In this post-humanist sensibility the verbal communication is not essential, exemplified in Blobby and Fifty's care for Bo, a silent *Personal mute*. It demonstrates a reaction against irony towards sincerity, a longing for humanness which is the indicator of post-ironic manifestation.

Chapter 6 - Narratives of suffering within VRChat

Throughout my fieldwork, I have experienced many moments where users of the game engage in trolling, became victims of trolling, and moments where it is not obvious whether someone is trolling or not. This chapter will explore the connection between post-irony and trolling, and it will be shown how the ways in which informants express suffering are related to trolling. Furthermore, it will discuss the notion of postmodern irony as collective behavior. During a panel at University College London regarding the contemporary uses of irony and post-irony in different modes of expression and the roles that humor and laughter play in them, Graham tells of how the hypothesis “ironic doubt is just dissatisfaction”, reminds him of subcultures such as beatniks, 1970’s punk and contemporary hipster behavior. He finds that postmodern ironic doubt had elevated into a lifestyle in these subcultures and that “as a Russianist [...] this reek of late soviet socialism”. In relation to this, he introduces Yurchak’s description of the late Soviet generation's lived experience of the decline of the Soviet, leading to phenomena such as *Stiob* (IAS 2018: 8:10). In his monography “Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation”, Yurchak describes that *Stiob* is an ironic performance that thrived under the late Soviet (Yurchak 2005: 250). He explains that *Stiob* could be an utterance, a text, a performance, or an entire persona, where the performer is seemingly not out of Soviet character. Such identification with the person, idea, or whatever the *Stiob* was directed at made it often impossible to tell if it was support, sincere ridicule, or a mixture of the two (Ibid. 252). The soviet *Stiob* plays on an overidentification with a form already present within Soviet public culture (Boyer 2017: 158). Yurchak describes how practitioners of *Stiob* refused to draw a line between irony and seriousness: “[they] refused to draw a line between these sentiments, producing an incredible combination of seriousness and irony, with no suggestive signs of whether it should be interpreted as the former or the latter, denying the very dichotomy between the two”. (Yurchak 2005: 249-250). Yurchak exemplifies a *Stiob* through the Russian hoax by musician Sergey Kuryokhin called "Lenin was a mushroom". In 1991 during a popular Russian television program, Kurekhin described that visual representations of a revolution happen later after the events have already taken place. (Yurchak 2011: 307-308). He started to draw parallels to a recent trip he had to Mexico, where he experienced how native people during ritualistic ceremonies would take Peyote, a Mexican cactus with strong psychotropic properties. Kurekhin noted that Russian forests have an abundance of hallucinogenic mushrooms (Ibid.: 308). Building on this premise, Kurekhin began to formulate his “Lenin was a mushroom thesis”. Yurchak explains that during the broadcast, which lasted

over an hour, the audience received no explanation of whether this was an ironic prank or a serious program, and that the next day the chairman of the Leningrad Regional Committee of the CPSU was visited by a delegation of Bolshevik veterans, who demanded an appeal to clarify the veracity of Kurekhin's claim (Ibid. 309-10). Yurchak further describes how Kurekhin, in April 1995, during an interview about his work, oscillated between serious analysis and dazzling irony in his communication (Ibid. 328).

Graham argues that in a society where irony becomes “kind of a weapon”, members of a cultural community can become “over-armed” for various reasons, leading to what he calls a “free-for-all”, where participants constantly strive to outflank other producers of ironic meaning, both by producing better irony and hereby ironically coat-switching from irony to sincerity and back (IAS 2018: 15:13). He states that “in the age of the tweet, the emoji, the .gif and TL;DR³⁷, every social media user can become an instant agent or target of public irony, in a way reserved previously for mass-media figures or at least for professional artists” (Ibid. 15:40). He proposes that this form of ironic free-for-all may cause the “death of irony” eventually leading to post-irony, exemplifying this through the late-soviet generations use of irony “[...]soviet irony to use the example again, in 1991, when the object of millions of private jokes, comments, gestures, and texts ceased to exist, the potency of that form of discourse also ceased to exist.” (Ibid. 16:00). Yurchak’s notion of the late-soviet generation's lived process leading to phenomenon such as *Stiob*, and especially Graham’s notion of an ironic free-for-all has been useful for me to have in mind during my fieldwork and the writing of this thesis, as this inspired me to explore transgressive informant expressions within VRChat and how this may be connected to the subject of suffering, like “ironic doubt is just dissatisfaction”. The transgressive expressions that I explore are related to the practice known as trolling. As described in the introduction of this thesis, I mention that Coleman describes how internet trolling can be understood as the practice of “trying to upset people by spreading grisly or disturbing content, igniting arguments, or engendering general bedlam” (Coleman 2015: 4). Among other things, Coleman recognizes trolls as akin to the trickster archetype, as she believes the trickster's intention is not to be didactic or moralizing but to demonstrate their ideas playfully (Ibid. 33). Nagle sums up trolling by referring to the quotation of Baudelaire's “an oasis of horror in a desert of boredom”, articulating a common sentiment originating in the romantics and found all the way through what she defines as “the

³⁷ TL;DR is acronym for “too long, didn’t read”

contemporary online cultures of transgression” (Nagle 2017: 34-35). She argues that a culture that produces trolling does this to share an unwanted gift, which she defines as a twist on Mauss's The Gift, and refers to the situationist Raoul Vaneigem's celebration of the reciprocal gift-giving system in pre-modern societies, on the grounds that only the purity of motiveless destruction or ruinous generosity can transcend instrumentalism (Ibid.).

Trolling as a crutch

22/06/2020 – DESCRIPTION:

I am standing in The Black Cat *world*. I find a user with a robot *avatar* standing at the bar table playing loud *ear rape*³⁸, trolling the nearby users. His username was Boviscopophobia. I approach him and decide to roleplay by telling him that I like his sound and ask him for absinth. He complies and gives me a virtual glass. This led to Boviscopophobia and me engaging with each other. Hanging out at the bar table, I see that he is regularly talking to a user called BIING, who has an *avatar* looking like a teenager wearing e-boy³⁹clothes. He has a childlike voice and mostly converses about how “high he was yesterday” on a combination of “whip-its and marijuana” and how “he deals drugs”. He seems to sympathize with the kid. At one point, BIING moves away from Boviscopophobia. This allowed me to start asking him questions. I tell him I am an anthropology student doing fieldwork in VR for my master thesis. He says, “that sounds interesting,” and asks me spontaneously if I want to interview him. I say yes, and we got seated at a table near the bar. First, I decided to ask him about the many trolls on VRChat, that make it hard to have a conversation. This led to him commenting on the difficulty in distinguishing whenever someone is sincere or ironic.

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

Before the coronavirus became “super big”, I was talking to a dude on here who told me this would be the next big pandemic. In my head, I was thinking, “damn, this dude is fucking crazy”, but here I am six months later thinking, damn because here I am barely getting any money working half-hours at work.

³⁸ *Ear rape* is a term used to define distorted or very loud sound to shock the listener. Its purposefully unbearable. (Know Your Meme 2021b)

³⁹ Contemporary subculture, their outfits commonly consist of baggy, thrifted clothes (Jennings 2019).

BOVISCOPHOBIA

I've had lots of different sincere conversations though here, as my partner and I live in different states from each other and can't see each other due to the ongoing COVID epidemic

As we talk, our conversation sometimes gets interrupted by other users. A form of trolling occurs when one of the users sitting next to Boviscopophobia and me starts saying clicking noises.

USER 1

CLICK CLICK CLICK

USER 2

I SEE YOU



RIP_Snorting is seated at the table while other users are standing next to him. The orange box around his robot head was drawn by the user in the pink shirt, possibly in an attempt to troll us. 22/06/2020

Another example of the trolling is when one user climbs up on the table, between Boviscopophobia and me, with his scantily clad "demon girl" Avatar.

USER 1, 2, AND OTHERS

Aww yeah, shake that babe/Wow/Damn, it even has dynamic booty physics

BOVISCOPHOBIA

Uh, nice.

One user, with the username Blue, plays an offensive sound through his microphone, repeating the word 'nigger'. However, the trolling does not derail the conversation. We both remain focused. I ask him why he thinks users troll on here

SIMULACRUM96

So how do you feel about the folk trolling in here?

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

Sometimes it is just really funny, and I am laughing my ass off, but sometimes I just want to have a heart-to-heart with someone, and it's getting in the way. However, I can always invite that someone to my *homeworld* if I need to have a genuine conversation.

In our conversation, I learn Boviscopophobia's real name, that he is 21 years old and lives in Florida with his parents. He has a daughter, and he wishes he could care for his girlfriend and child but can't due to financial problems. He tells me that he really likes irony and uses it "all the time". He describes how he has many "ear rape" videos on his private Facebook to express his anger and tiredness. He also uses angry reactions on Facebook, saying he does this to express his anger, even though his Facebook friends perceive it as being an ironic attempt at trolling.

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

When I grew up in high school, I was a real extreme *shitposter*; like on Facebook, my last name is BomBom [I assume he indicates that his last name on Facebook is meant as a joke]. I had no fucking connection to myself. I just *shitposted* strange, stupid shit. But as I've grown up and had a kid, I've kinda dulled out.

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

I am not gonna discredit people who ear rape an on a *World*. I used to do *ear rapes* all the time when I was playing Xbox, saying "AARRRGH" [he imitates

the sound through his microphone really loudly - others around the table say, “Holy shit, that was loud”]. And I still do so, because it is fucking funny,

This conversation led me to question him about his relationship with irony

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

Let me crack open another beer and talk some real shit with you. I use irony as a crutch. But I don't use it to define me. I kinda just use it like an ‘I am fucking tired, exhausted, I've worked a 12-hour shift and I don't want to express my fucking anger right now, so I'll just post a loud-ass fucking video on my Facebook wall, and that explains how fucking angry I am right now.

Blue, who played the offensive sounds, now joints our conversation with his real voice

BLUE

Some people just don't get it.

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

When I became a father, I had an ego-death, where I just didn't give a fuck what people thought about me. As long as my daughter is in a good position and I can support my baby mama. It is like, my daughter is the future, and I am in the past

BLUE

So, do you feel more focused now?

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

Yeah, in some sort of way. I feel like I suffer through worse work shifts than I did in the past.

At this point, the world crashes. I am now no longer at The Black Cat but inside a generic game menu.

However, after a few minutes, I see that I got an invite from Boviscopophobia to a private world. I go

there. It is a world looking like some cozy apartment. The world's name is "A Rainy Night In" There is rain dripping outside the window. He tells me that this is a world that he visits when he wants a private conversation. I ask him why he discussed drugs with what I thought sounded like a kid, referring to his previous conversation with the user named BIING. He tells me, "Are you talking about the one 14-year-old?". I confirm, and he tells me how he felt connected with him because he seems to want to "make money" illegally, which he did himself at that age by being a middleman in the marijuana trade. He tells me that he tries to guide the kid.

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

I tell him like, you shouldn't be doing this, in the sense that it will fuck your future up, but at the same time, it's like, yeah, that's a good bit of money

SIMULACRUM96

So, you were ironic?

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

It might seem like a joke [the talk about dealing drugs]; however, the listener [I assume he means BIING] might end up interpreting 'unironic intentions with it' and ends up living that kind of life.

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

It is like being half-ironic and half-being genuine, and you got to form your sense of meaning out of it.

BOVISCOPOPHOBIA

You just live your life and get to work with whatever information is given to you.

(Pause)

BOVISCOPHOBIA

But at the same time, I am a kind of fucked individual

The anxieties about earnest authenticity – decontextualization through the grotesque spectacle

Throughout my fieldwork, I became interested in the agency in terms of informant's shaped authenticity, their so-called "real self," which Miller's purpose is enhanced through online experiences. Miller states that research within the field of digital ethnography has noted that "people who have difficulty in expressing or 'being' themselves in the face to face interactions are more likely to craft what they regard as a 'real self' and form closer relationships with people they meet online" (Miller 2016. 111). He refers to fieldwork he conducted within a Chinese field site, where he talked with migrant informants doing manual labor, whom Miller states "experience online as the place in which they can be more human" (Ibid.: 112). Miller concludes that the assumption of social media as inauthentic, might in some cases be the practice of elitists, who "may seek to dismiss the attempts by less powerful populations to assert the authenticity of their self-crafting online" (Ibid.). However, in contrast to Miller's findings, for some online users, such as Boviscopophobia, social media does not make them more authentic. They may hide their authentic self through transgressive behavior, such as trolling. Boviscopophobia exemplifies this phenomenon, as he states that he uses trolling as a crutch to "express his anger," not just within the VRChat world behind a virtual *avatar* but also on his Facebook account under his real name. Could it be that he fears it is too self-pitying, self-promoting, banal, and just plain *cringe* to write a genuine, affectionate Facebook post about his financial and personal troubles? Or maybe he cannot articulate his problems in any other way? When I referred to his discussion about drugs with the user BIING, he did seem hesitant to express his real motives because he is, in his own words, "a kinda fucked up individual.". Thus he defined his statement as "half-ironic and half-being genuine". Hyperboles and transgressive communication, both used by Boviscopophobia, and the others around the table, might be initiated to provide some form of comic relief. This can be understood through Yurchak's use of the term decontextualization, meaning to shift associated meanings in unexpected directions. His study on the soviet artist group Mit'ki illuminates this phenomenon, whom he tells transformed their lifestyle into a grotesque representation of soviet life, associating its optimism, energy, and confidence in the bright tomorrow, with a complete lack of problems, concerns, aspirations, and goals (Yurchak 2005: 238-243, 252-253). Boviscopophobia, and the other users around the table in *The Black Cat*, switch between

engaging in meaningful conversation and grotesque trolling and another randomness. You start having a serious conversation with your informant, then a demon girl jumps on the table, and your informant jokingly says, "uh nice," acknowledging this grotesque spectacle. Then all of a sudden, one user disrupts my and my informant's conversation with offensive sounds. However, after a while, that same user with the offensive sounds jumps into my and Boviscopophobia conversation and affirms that he actually cares about the content of it, i.e., the question of trolling, by stating, "some people just don't get it." (maybe Blue could relate to Boviscopophobia?). At least for Boviscopophobia, trolling is not done to engage in a cynical reciprocal "sharing of an unwanted gift", to use Nagle's terminology. Instead, it is a crutch because of fear for engaging in non-cynical reciprocal sharing of fragility. I find that the awareness of trolling as a crutch may be an indicator of post-irony, as it recognizes one's individual entanglement of postmodern irony, possibly indicative of longing for sincerity.

"ALL YOU DO IS LAUGH"

06/08/2020 – DESCRIPTION.

My informant Blobby and I were hanging out at The Black Cat. A user named Limbic_system is doing what seems like a free-flow rap on a virtual stage. His *avatar* represents a man with dark *e-boy* clothes and a fox-tail. Many users stand around him and listen. The lyrics are melancholic and hopeless. At one point, he stops rapping; my friend Blobby approach him, and I follow

BLOBBY:

Good shit.

SIMULACRUM96

Don't put that Glock on yourself [jokingly, referring to the lyrics in his rapping]. Life is beautiful. Trust me; you can play VRChat and stuff. [I guess I said that in a somewhat playful manner]

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

No, trust me, it [life] is not beautiful; I've been in two wars, man, and I have two kids, it is not beautiful,

SIMULACRUM96

It gets better, though.

BLOBBY:

Yeah, you got two kids, that's beautiful.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

No, my life sucks.

Other users around the stage join the conversation, trying to cheer Limbic_system up as Limbic_System walks around the bar.

USER 1:

All life sucks, man.

Limbic_system then goes towards Blobby and me and says

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

I just don't care about anything anymore; I am just in VRChat right now, talking with people, everyone just put on a fake laugh.

My friend Blobby jokingly tells Limbic_system that he'll play a song for him

BLOBBY

Here you go, let me play one of your favorite songs; I know what you're into, I'll play some of that *sadboy*⁴⁰ shit.

⁴⁰ *Sadboy* is related to *e-boy* which was defined in footnote⁵⁰. The stereotypical *sadboy* listens to melancholic rap-music and primarily wears dark clothes.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

That *sadboy* shit? Haha, I am not sad, man. I am happy as I could be. I've got two kids; I fought for them in court; it took me two fucking years. I ain't sad about it; the only thing I don't like is how I get played all the time, every time I show my heart.

SIMULACRUM96

Keep doing that, man, yeah, be real. [I try to be optimistic]

Limbic_system goes into a rant

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

I have two kids to take care of; my mom doesn't come and visit me, my dad doesn't, my brother barely talks to me, I see one friend every fourth month, you don't know what it's like to be alone, I've been doing this my whole fucking life.

SIMULACRUM96

Come on, man. You're on VRChat right now; this is a way to interact with people.

Bobby decides to criticize Limbic_system statements

BLOBBY

It just sounds like you're calling the kids a burden.

This starts a conflict

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

I like how you're trying to instigate shit, Blobby. You are going to get torn apart by me. I'll make you look bad. You put on this *sadboy* music saying, saying you know what I like.

BLOBBY

Oh wow. I am shaking my dude. Are you gonna clap me, bud?



Limbic_system in black, Blobby in red/black panda avatar, Moonmaan as a bird with keyboard, and other users. 06/08/2020

This makes Limbic_system very angry. He shouts through his microphone

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

SHUT THE FUCK UP.

BLOBBY

Are you triggered?

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

Of course, I am triggered. You're trying to instigate shit.

Limbic_system then walks away from the stage. Another guy near the stage, with the username Moonmaan, starts playing a song where the lyrics contain "Shut the fuck up, you're a fucking cunt". Limbic_system thinks it's Blobby playing the song and comes back.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

You play this shit when I walk away? You're still instigating shit. Fuck you.

A lot of back and forth verbal attacks with Limbic_system threatening Blobby

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

I've been in the military; I used to fuck up shits like you.

Bobby replying to his threats by trolling, expressing himself in a high-pitched voice

BLOBBY

Oh no, he's a military man; he's going to beat me up.

After some more verbal attacks between the two, at one point, Limbic_system seems to have removed his VR headset as he stands completely silent and idle (maybe he went out to take a break?). Me, Bobby, Moonmaan, and the others around the stage start to converse with each other.

BLOBBY

Everybody has bad stuff happening; my sister has cerebral palsy. She'll never walk or talk, and I have to take care of her every day. Who cares? I am fine.

For some reason, I found it relevant to suddenly mention my anthropological interests.

SIMULACRUM96

I like how in VRChat that you can never tell if someone is trolling or being sincere.

Limbic_system suddenly comes back; maybe he had been listening to the conversation choose to be silent?

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

People are always fucking sincere, get out of here, but none of my VRChat friends cares about that. You talk for a few days, and they are gone forever

Moonman tells me, “you can tell, you can tell [if they are sincere or not]”, but is interrupted by Limbic_system before he can elaborate further.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

Shut the fuck up; I can’t stand you.

They once again start to engage in verbal attacks.

MOOMAN:

You don’t even know what the internet is, you fucking faggot.

Once again, back and forth occurs. In between this, Limbic_system continues talking about how none of his VRChat friends cares about him. This makes Mooman state

MOOMAN:

You don’t know shit.

I agree with Moomaan and tell Limbic_system

SIMULACRUM:

Yeah, you don’t know that. You don’t know if your friends actually care.

Moonman, however, chooses to continue being hostile towards Limbic_system.

MOOMAN:

I don’t come on the internet to cry about my problems.

Limbic_system, Moonmaan, and Blobby continue shouting at each other. At one point, Limbic_system blocks Blobby. Now it's only him and Moonmaan arguing. Limbic_system, at one point, shouts at Moonmaan in what seems like a combination of crying and anger.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

MAN, YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE TO FEEL PAIN.
YOU HAVE NO IDEA.

The other users around the stage start laughing at him.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

ALL YOU DO IS LAUGH.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

THIS IS A CRY FOR HELP, AND ALL YOU DO IS LAUGH.

One user says.

USER 2:

Oh my god. His kids are in the other room while this guy has a mental breakdown, screaming in front of a computer screen

MOOMAAN:

Yeah. Are you fucking kidding me? This guy thinks VRChat is real life.

At the same time, some tell Limbic_system to kill himself for being a "faggot", while I try to comfort him by saying, "don't take this so seriously; they are trying to rile you up". However, he doesn't seem to take my advice. At one point, Limbic_system again goes away for a while. I stay around the stage listening to people talking about his behavior. They exclaim, "What the fuck is wrong with him?" and "Why is he doing this?". Eventually, he comes back and says

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

My behavior is normal for someone who has been in the military, has two kids, and has been cheated on.

MOONMAAN

Are you gonna cry about it?

Limbic_system then, at least from the sound of his voice, starts crying and states.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

Yeah, I am gonna fucking cry about it. You have NO idea what I've been through.

Once again, tense back and forth verbal exchanges between two. However, from the sound of his voice, Limbic_system seems more sad than angry now. At one point, he tells Moonman.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

So, what, you've never been sad?

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

People like you really trigger me, you act like I am wrong, but I am the only one who's really human right now.

A few moments later, he moves into a dark storage room inside the Black Cat, where he stands at the corner while crying. I follow him to comfort him. There is a lot of back and forth between Limbic_system and other users, stating that it is insane that he is crying on VRChat, and should see a therapist. I keep telling him that he should not take all of this so seriously because "it is just a video game, not real life, they don't mean it". Limbic_system calms down one point. We talk about his supposed military life and general life story. He states that he got basic training at Fort Benning in Georgia, later stationed at Fort Hood in Texas, then went to Iraq for six months. He got a girlfriend, went to Afghanistan, came back, had two kids with the girlfriend, then he broke up with her once he found out she was cheating on him. Limbic_system tells me that he has had friends in real life and VRChat, but he felt they were fake relations because none of them ever came to see him or even contact him. Furthermore, he tells me that when he was younger, it was always him who had to go knocking at people's doors. As he is telling me all of this,

I can hear users in the background conversing, saying stuff like, “Why is he even on here? If he has such big problems, he should not be on the internet”. At one point, he Limbic_system tells me.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

For real, though, you don't think I hate coming on here having a mental breakdown, with my kids in the other room, while I am on fucking VRChat? I can't talk to my mom, dad, brother, friends. The reason I am doing it here is that I haven't got anyone else to fucking listen

Later I get to exchange pleasantries with what seems to be his two kids, as he suddenly decides to let them speak on the microphone. While I am engaging in casual conversation with the kids, once again, in the background, I hear someone talking about Limbic_system, stating, "everyone who has kids should think that it is a blessing in and of itself, and he starts to cry about shit in his life; I don't get that.". Limbic_system is listening. He talks to me about the person talking about him.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

I like how he [the user in the background] is trying to make me look bad, and it's just interesting to listen to.

SIMULACRUM96

It is not personal. The reason they talk like that is because of their view of your previous behavior, not you as a person.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

But why would they try to make me, a single father, look bad?

SIMULACRUM96

It might be because the guys in the background think you're doing it for attention.

LIMBIC_SYSTEM

I've been handling this shit forever. Nobody listens to me. The only place I can go is VRChat. I do want to go to a therapist. But guess what? I don't have enough money to get a babysitter so that I can go to a therapist

The performance of suffering

One could be inclined to describe this narrative through theory about gendered performances. Inspired by Goffman, Butler describes how the behavior that causes gender to exist has similarities to performative actions as we know it from the theater, i.e., gendered performances. Butler argues that gender identity is performed due to social sanction and taboo (Butler 1988: 520). Butler argues that the practice of the body today is linked to definite expectations of a gendered existence (Ibid. 524). She argues that its existence creates a series of gender norms that produce 'social fictions' about what is a natural configuration of the body and that this is evident in the binary descriptions of gender relations, namely man and woman. Actors in a theater are aware that they are performing. However, in Butler's view, we who perform our gender often do not know that our own normative thoughts about our gender are also a spectacle. Butler refers to the anthropologist Victor Turner, who, in his studies of social drama, tells that social actions require a performance that is repeated (Ibid. 526). According to Butler, we take our gender for granted and forget that our gender is constantly realized through social, performative actions. Thus, the frontstage performance of an individual's gender is based upon social presuppositions, which, as described by Goffman, has to comply with general moral criteria within a space. For this reason, Butler describes that sexuality is often a performative achievement, which that not everyone is able to sustain, and which in a lifetime, can give rise to doubt, anxiety, and dysphoria (Ibid.). It could be that the way in which Limbic_system performed his "suffering" led to gendered pejorative expressions directed towards him. Moonmaan, after all, tells him, "You don't even know what the internet is, you fucking faggot". Korobov argues that irony, nonchalance, humor, and parody are discursive strategies that make romantic heterosexuality possible because they allow men to transact conflicting contemporary gender norms that encourage men to be sensitive (Korobov 2009: 287). An example of this display of masculinity may be found in Boviscopophobia behavior. Boviscopophobia uses irony such as *ear-rape* trolling and "angry reactions on Facebook" to express his anger and utters self-irony through utterances such as "... but at the same time, I am a kinda fucked individual" when he is unsure about how to

articulate himself. It could be that Moonman and the others engaging in the public takedown of Limbic_system did so because there is a social assumption that one who happens to cry on the internet is feminine. After all, Limbic_system seemed very emotionally engaged in this whole ordeal.

However, going back to Rapport and Overing's notion of irony as "part-and-parcel of this individual force which 'insists on itself' and proceeds continue to create and to live its own truth", and linking it with Graham's notion of an ironic free-for-all, it may be that postmodern irony (ironically) has become a collective behavior, originating from collective agency, rather than the individual, I think that it has less do with gender, and more to do with how contemporary postmodern irony has led to people become skeptical of performances of suffering. I think it might be that it is not because the users in VRChat want to disregard performances of suffering (After all, users around the table did not start trolling Boviscopophobia when he stated that he used "irony as a crutch"), but rather have a problem which Limbic_system presented himself. It could be that the pejorative "faggot" is defined in this transgressive social context as being insincere, because his performance of suffering seemed superficial. Assuming Limbic_system is self-aware and recognizes in his mind that he is performing, he may be a textbook example of Yurchak's notion of *Stiob*. Nevertheless, that may still annoy other users because it is a superficial way of behaving in relation to the seriousness of life, for example, taking care of children, as one user states, "His kids are in the other room, while this guy has a mental breakdown, screaming in front of a computer screen", another stating "everyone who has kids should think that it is a blessing in and of itself, and he starts to cry about shit in his life; I do not get that". It is thus a question of the performance of suffering rather than that of gender. This raises the question of how to be sincere in regard to talking about suffering in a society where suffering may be perceived as a superficial performance.

I am not worried

11/08/2020 – DESCRIPTION.

Today I was conducting fieldwork on the Summer Solitude *world*, meeting users and engaging in casual conversations. I met Doolan, a computer science student in Canada, whom I talked to for quite some time. He seemed well-adjusted and friendly. We talked about Covid, my fieldwork, student life in Canada, video games, and the absurdity of VRChat. We also got into the subject of the problem with postmodern irony, particularly

Wallace's statement about the risk of “looking banal”, leading to people being afraid of what they write.

DOOLAN

I think people are afraid of leaving behind a chat log; many people are prone to betray each other these days on social media. Therefore, people try to stay ironic because they don't want to disclose themselves.

At one point, some user with a weird-looking cat avatar comes running towards us. He goes towards me and says.

USER 1:

What are you some kind of Bird from Sesame Street? [referring to my *avatar*]

SIMULACRUM96

What are you, some kind of David Lynchian cat? [referring to his *avatar*]

USER 1:

I am just a little kitty cat trying to find my way down the roads of life, but you are that bird from Sesame Street?

I suddenly see a guy wearing a Kermit avatar. I remember that this is a character for Sesame Street, so I say, “Oh, yeah, I am from Sesame Street, and there’s Kermit”. The person in the Kermit avatar is standing near a bonfire. His username is Piecake. I jokingly tell the cat, “Yeah, I see Kermit is trying to commit suicide”. The user with the Kermit avatar looks at me and says.



Doolan on the left, with Piecake on the right standing next to the bonfire. 11/08/2020

PIECAKE

Yeah, all the time, every day. I am drinking alcohol right now; I am hoping for alcohol poisoning. True story

The tone of his voice makes me think it is a kid.

SIMULACRUM96

Life is good. Just don't do like that Kermit in that Johnny Cash 'Hurt' music video [referring to an internet *meme* about Kermit engaging in self-destructive acts] (Backward Slate 2008)

Now Piecake goes into some kind of tirade.

PIECAKE

Life is pointless. God is a lie. When you die, it's all black

SIMULACRUM96

No, it isn't. Everything is awesome.

I said that with an ironic tone of voice; Doolan decides to reply in what I perceive as a much more sincere tone of voice.

DOOLAN

Everything is what you make it

All of a sudden, the Piecake starts speaking about alcohol.

PIECAKE

Alcohol tastes like shit, doesn't it?

DOOLAN

It doesn't have to. Haven't you tried a mixed drink? Rom and Coke? I like that a lot,

Doolan and I spend some time explaining our knowledge about mixed alcoholic drinks. The Piecake tells us that right now, he is drinking Fanta and Rum. Piecake asks us if we can guess how old he is.

SIMULACRUM96

I guess you are between 13 and 15.

PIECAKE

No. I am 12.

SIMULACRUM96

Well, then you've got to be Scandinavian now that your parents let you drink
[I say jokingly].

PIECAKE

I am from Germany.

I spend some time talking about Weissbier. Piecake does not seem to understand much. At one point, I compliment him on his English skills. He states that the reason he can speak English is that he has a British family. I tell Piecake to keep playing video games to improve his English skills, as it was something I did myself at his age. Then all of a sudden.

PIECAKE

Fuck. I spilled the fucking Fanta and Rum on the floor.

SIMULACRUM96

Why are you even drinking alone? You shouldn't do that. Why don't you invite some girls?

He did not answer my question. Timepass and Piecake become increasingly attention-seeking. He keeps telling Doolan and me how "fucked" he is as his speech gets increasingly slurry. As we are inside the virtual world of VRChat, it is unclear whether he is just acting or is actually drunk. But I was pretty sure that he was overplaying it. However, I decided to tell him to be cautious.

SIMULACRUM96

Please don't drink too much because that will probably cause more problems than just spilling your drink on the floor.

PIECAKE

Who cares? I am gonna die anyway.

He starts complaining about being 12 years old

PIECAKE

I can't do shit, can't smoke weed, can't do anything.

SIMULACRUM96

But you can do that when you get older?

PIECAKE

When you get older, the only thing you can look forward to is death.

Together with Doolan, I try to be compassionate.

SIMULACRUM96

That isn't true. You can play video games and get educated in between that.

DOOLAN

You get to talk to girls too.

He tells us he is about to vomit, so we tell him to get some water to drink. But he disregards our advice.

PIECAKE

I got enough problems. I don't care if there is one more.

DOOLAN

What problems do you have?

PIECAKE

I don't wanna talk about it.

A few moments go by.

PIECAKE

I finally understand why people drink this shit. It's fucking great.

DOOLAN

It's great until it's not.

SIMULACRUM96

Exactly.

PIECAKE

I would drink every fucking day if I could.

SIMULACRUM96

You don't want to do that. Then you will be dead by my age.

PIECAKE

Is it that bad to die? Imagine if God exists; wouldn't it be good to die then?

DOOLAN

I don't like to think about that too much; I am still too young to think about that.

PIECAKE

I think about death all the time.

DOOLAN

I thought about those things when I was your age; it's all about growing up.

PIECAKE

Suicide?

DOOLAN

No. Well Maybe. Those thoughts.

Here I come again with my somewhat joking tone

SIMULACRUM96

Suicide is such an egoistic thing; it's like, 'look at me, I am just gonna kill myself. [I say that in a high-pitched voice]

Then I change into a more serious tone

SIMULACRUM96

If you are serious about these thoughts, you should talk with your parent about them.

PIECAKE

Don't worry about it.

SIMULACRUM96

I don't worry about it, but I think I understand what you are saying.

I decide to tell an anecdote about how I had the opposite problem his age, being afraid of dying, but that I no longer have that fear. Doolan also tells him an anecdote about how he was angry in puberty but then suddenly got chill, almost like a switch. Now, after our anecdotes, the kid decides to utter a controversial remark.

PIECAKE

I am fucking smoking weed with a guy who fucked me when I was 8.

PIECAKE

I don't fucking care about my drinking.

I am silent as I think about the right way to reply to these remarks

DOOLAN

Really? [he says in a skeptic tone of voice]

DOOLAN

Just don't drink too much tonight. You should also worry about your health.

SIMULACRUM96

Also, if what you are saying is true, it's a crime. You shouldn't joke about that.

PIECAKE

What are people gonna do, arrest me? I am 12.

SIMULACRUM96

No. Help you.

DOOLAN

Exactly. You're innocent. You're an innocent person

At one point, the kid goes to get some water. Doolan and I are now alone.

SIMULACRUM96

I think it's a girl, and I think she's trying to troll us.

DOOLAN

I don't know, I hope so.

That's the only thing we say about that. Then we start to talk casually. Thirty seconds go by. Piecake comes back. Maybe he had been listening in on us, hoping we would discuss him?

PIECAKE

I don't think I am going to get anything [talking about water]

PIECAKE

I fell over.

DOOLAN

Yeah, okay, go to bed.

PIECAKE

I am not going to fucking sleep. I am drunk. I want to get the full fucking experience of getting fucked up

DOOLAN

Well, hopefully, you don't wake up while drunk. That's an awful experience

SIMULACRUM96

Yeah, while puking. That would suck. All that Rom and Fanta on your mother's bed linen. She would be so mad at you.

PIECAKE

She already caught me once, and she would be so mad if I woke up having drunk, with puke on the floor.

DOOLAN

So why do you do it?

PIECAKE

Look at me, don't you see how much I am having fun? That not usually the type of thing I do. I eat all day and watch YouTube videos to fucking forget everything that happens in real life.

SIMULACRUM96

Wow, that sounds just like every other 12 years old. [I state in an ironic tone of voice]

Doolan and I laugh a bit, then Doolan tells Pieface.

DOOLAN

Things will turn out all right; just don't go down a dark path.

PIECAKE

I am going down a dark path, all right.

DOOLAN

You can afford to go down a dark path as a child, but

(Pause)

Things get better.

SIMULACRUM96

Yeah, it's true; things do get better once you're older

Piecake keeps telling us about how he's "not doing anything", "is lazy," and that "we all die, so who cares". As he does this, Doolan tries to comfort him. I keep my distance.

DOOLAN

You'll get better. It'll be all right. I had those thoughts too at your age.

I didn't think the kid's whining would amount to anything other than more self-pitying and attention-seeking, so I decided to ask the kid some other questions, as I wanted to know if it was possible for him to change the subject.

SIMULACRUM96

What video games do you play?

PIECAKE

I enjoy playing Grand Theft Auto [a video game] because you can get your aggressions out when you punch somebody in the head, and I can't do that in real life.

DOOLAN

Yeah, because that would be stupid.

PIECAKE

Yeah. [as he laughs]

PIECAKE

But you can always punch yourself. I am kidding. Or am I?

I start to walk around furiously, being silent, because I found this situation embarrassing. However, I was still curious to see how it would escalate. So, I continued to listen in on the conversation between Doolan and Piecake.

DOOLAN

Yeah, many girls do that. I don't see the reason why you would, though.

PIECAKE

I do it because it doesn't leave any scars like cutting.

DOOLAN

I don't see why people would cut either.

Piecake starts rambling about how it feels good to bleed. Suddenly a user with a small fairy avatar comes over. I shout, "Look at the furry!" and start describing it to Doolan. This is my attempt at stopping this awkward conversation. The small fairy pat Doolan's back using its hands, but it doesn't converse with us vocally. As we give our new fairy friend more and more attention, Piecake starts to be louder. He makes puke noises and rambles about how much he "loves us". I don't reply at first. However, Doolan does after a while, and I eventually join him.

DOOLAN

You will be okay.

SIMULACRUM96

Everything is awesome.

The Fairy character starts laughing using an emote. Time goes, and other users, including some of my other informants, come to join us. Doolan and I gradually become less interested in talking with Piecake but are still nice towards him, sometimes trying to include him in our conversations with the other users.

Why do you have to be so cool?

The technicalities of virtual worlds, such as those within VRChat, mix the “virtual” and the “real”. Nardi discusses this in relation to her ethnographic fieldwork within the video game World of Warcraft, explaining that her informants use the term "real world" to distinguish themselves from virtual worlds because they "have to name it something" (Nardi 2015). They hereby denote a notion of concrete "realness" separate from their experiences in different virtual worlds (Ibid.). Assuming that Piecake is roleplaying, it may be that he is trying to appear cool and edgy, maybe in an attempt to impress us, two adults. Doolan and I maintain a friendly tone towards the kid, even though we both find his behavior unusual. Being able to subvert societal norms through technology makes virtual worlds like the ones in VRChat very apt for attention-seeking. That Piecake decides to enrich me, and Doolan with stories of pedophilia and rape might be a symptom of him roleplaying modern public histrionics about mental illness such as depression. Our understanding of histrionic attention-seeking is not only influenced by the historical situation but also by our geographic and mental distance from the societies giving rise to this histrionic attention-seeking. Whitlock, a scholar in the confluence of social media and mental illness, describes that the phenomenon is not new “The hierarchy of the most depressed was a '90s phenomenon: Who's the saddest, most anxious, got the most fucked up family? The stigma was always there, too, but within sub-communities, there's competition over who's worse off. And now, there are all these new platforms” (Graf and Horowitz 2019). The reason that I indicate that Piecake is an attention-seeking reminder of this “90's mess up culture” and the reason that I found him annoying, maybe because of my normative understanding of superficiality. He may try to tell something sincere about his life, maybe by histrionically extravagating about "rape" and his use of "drugs", but I don't think that is post-ironic. It's rather *cringe*, in my personal view. The *cringe*-part is not that he is a potential abuse victim, but rather his communication. It was really hard for me to be seriously concerned with the well-being of some abused kid on VRChat, due to the nature of the medium. Anyone with moral decency would obviously want to call the police, SSP (or the like) if they heard a kid express themselves as Piecake does within VRChat. However, this is not possible to do within the confines of this online game. I, therefore, choose

to express annoyance and ironic distance "Wow, that sounds just like every other 12 years old" and "Everything is awesome", with a hint of compassion. "If you are serious about these thoughts, you should talk with your parent about it", unlike Doolan, who's less cynical and telling Piecake, "You will be okay".

Death and meaninglessness

Piecake's comments on death and that everything is meaningless "we all die, so who cares" may, in the best case, be a form of trolling directed towards Doolan and me. While it may be inauthentic, it may, on the other hand, relate to the notion of death and life as being "meaninglessness". Steger argues that Psychological distress and psychopathology are related to the lack of meaning of life and can point to an existential crisis (Steger 2012). It may thus be said that an "expression of suffering", like that of Limbic_system, and Piecake, is a sign of the existential crisis that arises when they realize the apparent transience and meaninglessness of their existence. Grossberg argues that youth unity during the 80's dominating rock and roll culture was determined by what he defines as "the context of postmodernity" (Grossberg 1983: 107). He describes how youths, angered by the boring repetitiveness and the meaningless they meet in the contemporary world, celebrates these very conditions in their leisure through "technology, noise, repetition and fragmentation" (Ibid). Some such as Piecake may suspend this feeling of meaninglessness through more destructive behavior; after all, he told me that "I am drinking alcohol right now; I am hoping for alcohol poisoning. True story ". Young argues that youth suicide may be connected to an overwhelming sense of boredom and meaninglessness, with "drugs, sexual promiscuity, and television" as commonly turned to in an attempt to fill "the existential void" that is created by lack of activating stimuli, but that these escape- mechanism demands only further sources of simple stimuli (Young 1985: 58). Yang et al. argue that existential crisis is realized as a "liminal experience" where one's very own survival are in danger (Yang et al. 2010: 317). For some people, death may be an acceptable option for escaping this feeling of being in an existential crisis. At least for now, I am not worried, and I consider what Piecake tried to do as sort of "rock and roll". The metronome of "meaninglessness" in his daily life is celebrated on a late Tuesday in August, through the use of transgressions in a virtual space, where no parents, no social workers, or anyone else for that matter can do anything but either make fun of him or try to be compassionate with him, "What are people gonna do, arrest me? I am 12".

Symparanekromenoi and irony as a tyrant

Kierkegaard describes a young *aesthete* in his novel *Either/Or*. The young *aesthete* is unsatisfied with his life and speaks of it as an activity that is "empty and meaningless" (Watkin 1990: 66). Kierkegaard defines the *aesthete* as one who believes that "enjoyment" is the highest purpose of life. However, Kierkegaard argues that the best moment of enjoyment is accompanied by death; thus, the *aesthete* sees that pleasure cannot be a point of life, and this is leading to his "life suffering" (Ibid: 66-67). The *aesthete*, then, as defined by Kierkegaard, uses irony to cope with this inevitable suffering. Kierkegaard believed that the *aesthete's* use of irony is a method of trying to become free from suffering. In a similar vein to the *Stiob* of the late Soviet generation, this type of irony manifests as a form of lifestyle, such as it can be exemplified in the previously described ironic approach of Kierkegaard's Johannes, described by Poulsen as having a fundamentally ironic approach to the world, and whose meaningless seduction attempts did not appease anything. Dulk describes that Kierkegaard associated the problematic irony of his time with the first half of the 19th century's Romanticist poets (Dulk 2012: 331). Therefore, the irony Kierkegaard described, he called romantic irony. Kierkegaard believes romantic irony negated all of the historical actuality, in contrast to his admiration of Socratic irony, which only negates a given actuality, in the case of Socrates the actuality in Athens, thus leading to a constructive form of irony with ambitions of a better future (Andersen 2010: 131-132). Romantic irony showed itself in the way that the *aesthete* could not handle the absolute seriousness of life, its context. Thus, the *aesthete* starts to do poetry about himself, Kirkegaard writing, "He does not only poeticize himself, but he also poeticizes his surroundings" (Ibid: 133). Dulk describes that Wallace, like Kierkegaard, concludes that irony is "good", but only if it is employed in a given temporal actuality (Dulk 2012: 330). The worries of Kierkegaard concerning the romantic irony's way of negating all historical actuality is thus reminiscent of Wallace's critique of the destructiveness of postmodern irony. Both Kierkegaard and Wallace criticize the form of irony, which overcoats the rest of society in a feedback loop, irony for irony's sake. Kierkegaard believed that the highest ideal for the *aesthete* was "the dream world" (Ibid. 134). Andersen describes this as a form of *spidsborgerlighed* (bourgeoisie⁴¹), where everything for the *aesthete* had to happen at habitual times, but for no reason what-so-ever: "People swarmed in nature St. Hansdag, you were crushed on the big day of prayer, you fell in love when you turned 20, you went to bed at 10 o'clock". Kierkegaard believed that the *aesthete's* idea of "the dream world" was fundamentally flawed, as it never constitutes an actual ideal:

⁴¹ Roughly translated.

“The ideal pursuit has no ideal again; for every ideal at the same moment, however, is merely an allegory which conceals a higher ideal in itself, and thus in the Infinite.” (Ibid.). Kierkegaard describes one of those inadequacies through how the *aesthete* cope with life by becoming *symparanekromenos*, meaning the fellowship of those nearly dying, and the celebration of death as a release from the struggle shows that suffering rather than pleasure is the fact of one's existence (Wakins 1990: 66).

Piecake's remarks can be understood through the sentiment of *symparanekromenoi*. His form of understanding of his existence becomes apparent in his reply to me regarding my worries that his drinking would lead to more significant problems, "Who cares? I am gonna die anyway". Similarly, he feels pessimistic about his age, as he cannot engage in what he finds pleasurable, complaining about being 12 years old, saying, "I can't do shit, can't smoke weed, can't do anything". Connell describes that it might be that one cannot accuse the *symparanekromenoi* of avoiding the thought of death, as they already refer to themselves as the ones who are already dying, thus transforming death into something external and evasive "they evade the thought of death as annihilation and substitute for it their condition of reflective loss of presence" (Connell 2006: 430). Kierkegaard believed that this form of sharing of misery negatively with others in a spirit of egocentric defiance achieves nothing, least of all, a way out of one's problem (Watkin 1990: 66). This external sentiment is demonstrated in Piecake's performance of suffering by his remarks, "Is it that bad to die? Imagine if God exists, wouldn't it be good to die then?" in his reply to me and Doolan's quasi-didactic notions regarding the problem with drinking. The same is expressed by Limbic_system's self-mythologizing antics, as described through his irony, when he answers in response to Blobby calling him a *sadboy*, saying, "That sadboy shit? Haha, I am not sad, man. I am happy as I could be. I have got two kids; I fought for them in court, it took me two fucking years".

As previously theorized, users thought Limbic_system was a "fag" because they perceived him as being superficial. But would users not believe he was sincere? After all, Limbic_system explained to me that he was very sincere and that he had to have mental breakdowns online because nobody outside VRChat would listen to him: "For real though, you do not think I hate coming on here having a mental breakdown, with my kids in the other room, while I am on fucking VRChat? I can't talk to my mom, dad, brother, friends. The reason I am doing it here is that I haven't got anyone else to fucking listen". As examples of Vermeulen's notion of "honesty is not a natural way of being but a choice one makes, as far as circumstances allow", the users decided to use trolling and irony to express their thoughts regarding

Limbic_system's performance of *suffering* because everything else would sound what Mooman calls "faggy", or, as it will be later described though Wallace, banal. The way in which Kierkegaard understood the superficiality of the *aesthete* could be used to understand the users of VRChat's skepticism of Limbic_system's performances of suffering. Users tried to be sincere with Limbic_system, but Limbic_system mistook their sincerity as ironic; thus, he kept on performing his suffering, leading to a sort of complementary schismogenesis⁴², with the others engaging in more trolling, as Limbic_system becomes angry (and sad), all while dialogue ceases to exist. I remind once again of Coleman's view that a troll's intention is not to be didactic or moralizing but to demonstrate his ideas in a playful way (Coleman 2015: 33-35). In contrast to Coleman's view, I believe the trolling used towards Limbic_system may have been didactic, trying to express an empathic understanding of his suffering but rejecting his ironic appeal to the *symparanekromenoi*. The first thing a user tells Limbic_system once he expressed his appeal is that not just Limbic_system's life sucks, but that "all life sucks", thus the user is trying to engage with Limbic_system using comic relief. But he gets ignored. Blobby uses communications that try to soften the issue of suffering when he jokingly tells Limbic_system that he will play some "sadboy shit". However, Limbic_system understands this as hostile, using ironic communication to explain his suffering to Blobby, "Haha, I am not sad, man. I am happy as I could be. I've got two kids; I fought for them in court; it took me two fucking years. I ain't sad about it; the only thing I don't like is how I get played all the time once I show my heart". Blobby questions what he thinks is a form of cynical way in which Limbic_system communicate about his kids by starting, "it just sounds like you're calling the kids a burden", which Limbic_system considers as if he were him trying to "instigate shit". This way of reacting towards Blobby's statement was the catalyst of ridicule. However, even though tensions were high, with the users trolling and Limbic_system trying to defend himself, there were still moments of empathy occurring throughout the back and forth between Limbic_system and the other users. For example, Blobby told about his sister having cerebral palsy, which he still manages without any appeal to the irony of *Symparanekromenoi*, as he states, "Everybody has bad stuff happening". In the same way, Moonmaan tells Limbic_system that he should not yell about his friends not caring about him since he believes that Limbic_system doesn't actually know if that is the truth, telling Limbic_System "You don't know shit". Wallace describes that "irony tyrannizes us" (Wallace 2015 1993: 198). He talks of how

⁴²Otto and Bubandt defines complementary schismogenesis as the "generation of structurally opposed forms among interacting peoples: symmetrical and inverse forms that at once match and negate each other" (Otto & Bubandt 2010: 118)

postmodern irony ends up saying, "How very banal to ask what I mean" and describes it as a form of institutionalized oppressiveness, "anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or a prig. And herein lies the oppressiveness of institutionalized irony, the too-successful rebel: the ability to interdict the question without attending to its subject is when exercised, tyranny. It [uses] the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself" (Ibid: 199). Under the circumstance that society today is overcoated by postmodern irony, it may be that the only way in which Limbic_System, Boviscopophobia, and Piecake were able to articulate suffering was through a performance that incorporates trolling and/or extraverted suffering.

Conclusion

This thesis was a study with the purpose of answering the research question “What is post-irony, and how does it manifest itself on social media?”. The study was conducted through fieldwork carried out on the visual- and auditory- social world of VRChat, using traditional anthropological methods and virtual-reality hardware. The empirical data gathered during the fieldwork on VRChat was described through narratives. These narratives were presented in the format of screenplays, inspired by Hastrup's notion of Shakespeare's theater.

The first side of the research question, “What is Post-irony”, is answered in the theoretical chapter. Post-irony is defined as a reaction against a specific form of irony, the postmodern irony, through scholars such as Andersen, Konstantinou, Linstead and Collison, Vermeulen, and Wallace. Furthermore, I introduce a short preliminary fieldwork, which I conducted on Danish *shitposting* groups on Facebook to contextualize the question of post-irony. The setting I describe is one where group members participate in the emic concept of *shitposting*. I found that *shitposting* has rather arbitrary meaning, with some informants indicating that it is used as a form of bullying, self-expression, attention-seeking, or immunity to critique. I felt that *shitposting* did not stand for anything other than an emic set of activities and values not defined by anything other than itself. Thus, I ended up trying to consider the phenomenon in an etic way as a manifestation of postmodern irony. This fieldwork thus helped me shape my understanding of postmodern irony, in contrast to post-irony.

The second side of the research question, “and how does it manifest on social media”, is answered through the incorporation of narratives. These narratives illustrate informant expressions related to the subjects of love and suffering, as they appeared on VRChat. I have throughout this thesis clarified how these narratives are related to post-irony. This was done by relating the narratives to different authors and scholar's concepts regarding post-irony as a reaction against postmodern irony, including additional literature related to both the subjects of love and suffering and the terms sincerity and irony.

In Chapter 5 on the narratives of love, I propose that increasing entanglement of modern society in postmodern irony may have led to emotional engagement being frowned upon, leading to a form of post-ironic expression in the confines of VRChat when informants express sentiments related to the subject

of love. My empiric data indicate that my informants from VRChat may be reacting against the superficiality of the expressions of modern love while at the same time using terminology related to the modern concept of confluent love. Post-irony manifests itself in the informant's expressions that are reminiscent of the concept of romantic love, embedded in the self-awareness of a society entangled in ironic self-reflexivity as part of postmodern irony. Furthermore, post-irony manifests in the informants' rapid switching between feelings of sincerity and irony, which I have been related to MacDowell's concept of *quirky* and his notion of "ironic detachment with sincere emotional engagements". Moreover, I have discussed a post-ironic sense of being through Giles's posthumanist reading of Wallace and relating it to the emic VRChat phenomenon of *personal mute*. This post-ironic sense of being incorporates the longing for humanness in a posthumanist sentimental sense, where even non-humans may be valued as more authentically human, regarding their empathy, than that of humans who engage in enforced ironic self-reflexivity, characteristic for postmodern irony.

In Chapter 6 on the narratives of suffering, I propose that postmodern irony may have become a collective behavior, originating from collective agency rather than the individual. I relate this to Rapport and Overing's notion of "irony as part-and-parcel of this individual force which 'insists on itself' and proceeds to continue to create and to live its own truth" and Graham's notion of an ironic free-for-all, which demonstrates the idea that in a society where "irony has become a weapon", people will "strive to outflank other producers of ironic meaning, both by producing better irony and hereby ironically coat-switching from irony to sincerity and back ", and which Graham proposes may lead to "the death of irony" making way for post-irony. My narratives indicate that postmodern irony has become a collective behavior to such a degree that the only way informants can articulate their suffering is through a performance that incorporates trolling and/or extraverted suffering. I propose that informant's expressions of suffering signify an existential crisis that arises when they realize their existence's transience and meaninglessness. Post-irony manifests itself in moments where informants acknowledge trolling as a crutch to avoid engaging in non-cynical reciprocal sharing of fragility. Furthermore, post-irony manifests itself when informants use trolling didactically, in a sense trying to express an empathic understanding of suffering, while at the same time rejecting performances of suffering that seem superficial in the same vein as Kierkegaard's description of the *aesthetes* whom he came to consider as *symparanekromenoi*.

As mentioned in the introduction, love and suffering were the subjects where the workings of post-irony manifested itself most clearly. Now that I have illustrated the manifestation of post-irony on social media, that of VRChat, I want to reflect a bit on some shortcomings of this thesis. In my process of conducting fieldwork, as noted previously, the subjects of love and suffering arose according to informant's expressions. However, within the confines of the thesis, I did not enter an exploration of the relation between these two subjects, as I was worried that it would muddle the question of post-irony. Instead, I briefly touched on the writings of Kierkegaard and his views on the subjects, some of which have been introduced throughout this paper. Moreover, during the work with this thesis, I came to believe that there is a relation between romantic irony, postmodern irony, and post-irony. I think there may be strong similarities between the writing of Wallace and Kierkegaard, as already noted by Dulk. I think that Kierkegaard has an ironic attitude in his writing while at the same time criticizing irony, similarly to how Wallace uses in "postmodern ideas and assumptions" (in the words of Timmer), even while he criticizes postmodern irony.

I want to end this thesis by stating that I am concerned that post-irony as a term could become used in a superficial rhetorical way of defending one's own behavior by stating that you are post-ironic, thus trying to become immune to critique, in the same way as Wallace was concerned by postmodern irony, in his observation that whoever questions the ironist, ends up looking "hysterical or a prig", with the ironist stating "How very banal to ask what I mean".

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Abstract in Danish

Denne afhandling i faget antropologi søger at besvare forskningsspørgsmålet: *Hvad er post-ironi, og hvordan viser post-ironi sig på sociale medier?* Afhandlingen inddrager således et emne, der ikke tidligere er blevet behandlet i fagdisciplinen, nemlig post-ironi. Post-ironi bliver i afhandlingen belyst som en reaktion mod postmoderne ironi. Den amerikanske forfatter David Foster Wallace, som i afhandlingen benævnes som frontfigur i opgøret mod postmoderne ironi, beskrev i 1994 hvordan tidstypisk ironi var blevet til en giftig og destruktiv kraft, da ironien var blevet retningsløs, og uforpligtet på andet end det indforståede grin. Således udspringer post-ironi af en følelse af, at postmoderne ironi har ført til en alt for overfladisk tilgang til tilværelsens reelle alvor, mens post-ironien ikke holder sig for god til en tidvis og midlertidig accept af det sentimentale, naive og banale, trods den nærliggende risiko for rullede øjne, og udsagn som ”Ej, hvor er du banal”. I forsøget på at belyse post-ironi på sociale medier foretog jeg først et præliminært feltarbejde på Facebook, specifikt på danske *shitposting*-grupper, fra 15/06/2020 til 30/06/2020. I løbet af dette feltarbejde blev jeg ikke klogere på post-ironi, men fik en forståelse for hvad jeg opfatter som en slags postmoderne ironi, der viste sig igennem informants brug af det emiske begreb *shitposting*. Selv om feltarbejdet ikke ledte til en forståelse af post-ironi, blev det alligevel benyttet i denne afhandling som en kontekstualisering af spørgsmålet om post-ironi. Efter det præliminære feltarbejde påbegyndte jeg et feltarbejde på VRChat, fra 08/07/2020 til 27/10/2020. Dette feltarbejde blev udført ved hjælp af traditionelle antropologiske metoder og virtual reality-hardware. For at besvare mit forskningsspørgsmål inddrager jeg narrativer fra mit feltarbejde på VRChat. De narrativer berører informanternes sprogbrug om emnerne kærlighed og lidelse. Årsagen til at jeg inddrager emnerne kærlighed og lidelse, er fordi sprogbrug knyttet til disse emner viste sig mest tydeligt i løbet af feltarbejdet, og på en måde, der var mest velegnet til at illustrere post-ironi. I afhandlingen blev det afklaret, hvordan disse narrativer er relateret til post-ironi. Dette blev gjort ved at perspektivere narrativerne til tidligere forfatteres teorier vedrørende post-ironi som en reaktion mod postmoderne ironi, herunder anden litteratur relateret til emnerne kærlighed og lidelse, samt oprigtighed og ironi. I kapitlet om narrativer om kærlighed illustrerede jeg hvordan den stigende komplikation af det moderne samfund i postmoderne ironi har ført til, at følelsesmæssigt engagement er blevet tabubelagt, hvilket har medført en slags post-ironisk udtryksmåde blandt mine informanter, særligt når informanter udtrykker følelser relateret til emnet kærlighed. Min empiriske data viser at informanter i VRChat er trætte af overfladisk ”moderne kærlighed”, men selvom de er, bruger de stadigvæk terminologi som er relateret til det

moderne koncept sammenflydende kærlighed. Post-ironien viser sig således i informanternes udtryk om emnet kærlighed, hvor der indgår en slags stræben efter traditionel romantisk kærlighed, samtidig med at de er bevidste om, at det ydre samfund er viklet ind ironisk selvrefleksivitet der gør det vanskeligt at udtrykke netop romantisk kærlighed. Ydermere, viser post-ironi sig i informanternes hastige følelsesmæssige skift mellem oprigtighed og ironi. Jeg har også diskuteret en post-ironisk følelse af væren der inkorporerer længslen efter menneskelighed i en posthumanistisk sentimental forstand, hvor ikke-mennesker kan betragtes som mere autentisk menneskelige med hensyn til empati, end mennesker, der kun engagerer sig med påtvunget ironisk selvrefleksivitet, som er karakteristisk for postmoderne ironi. I kapitlet om narrativer om lidelse, anfører jeg, at postmoderne ironi muligvis er blevet en kollektiv adfærd, der stammer fra en kollektiv agens, snarere end individets agens. Mine narrativer om emnet lidelse belyser, at postmoderne ironi er blevet en så gennemgående del af informanternes virkelighed, at den eneste måde hvorpå mine informanter kan sætte ord på deres lidelser, er igennem en slags optræden, der inkorporerer både internet-trolling og/eller overeksponeret lidelse. Post-ironi viser sig således i øjeblikke, hvor informanter erkender, at de troller fordi de frygter deling af egne skrøbeligheder der finder sted uden kynisme. Desuden viser post-ironi sig, når nogle af mine informanter bruger deres trolling didaktisk, hvor de forsøger at udtrykke en empatisk forståelse af andres lidelse, samtidig med at de afviser den overfladiske opvisning af personlig smerte.