



# Virtual Responsibility in Criminal Narratives

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## Introduction:

A key element of Bamberg's (2012) model of identity navigation refers to constancy of the self over time and the importance of this to identity in narratives. This is particularly relevant to criminal narratives because offenders may want to preserve a sense of themselves as good people by seeing their past acts as being momentary blips in otherwise good lives, or may try to build a coherent narrative about their past lives that attempts to justify their current actions. Bamberg (2012) explores how we see ourselves as similar or different to our past and future selves, but this can also be applied where narrators seem to have more than one current self. This poster explores how criminals might create virtual selves through their narratives and in turn avoid moral agency through the creation of virtual responsibility. Key points from the literature are combined with examples from a corpus of pre-crime narratives.

## 1. Splitting of the self

*'I wonder how/when I got so fucked up w my mind, existence, problem — when Dylan Benet2 Klebold got covered up by this entity containing Dylan's body . . .'* (Klebold)

Lifton (1986) describes 'doubling' as the way in which people who harm create two personas and gives the example of Nazi doctor's carrying out killings and then being able to return to their lives as good fathers without blurring the two. Cohen (2001) asserts that the process is more subtle than this and explores the way in which someone may achieve 'moral balance' by compartmentalising harmful actions and ensuring that on balance they are good people, with 'bad' actions kept in a small compartment within.

## 2. Rehearsing agency

*'All incriminatory information in this work is written "in character" and must not be confused with an actual plan, or strategy to attempt to harm any individuals or infrastructure'* (Breivik)

Brockmeier (2009) and Bruner (2004) both explore the way in which narrative may enable a person to rehearse their agency as killers. The narrator may take on a certain role in their story in an attempt to become more like that person and be more capable of killing. Jarvinen (2000) explains that narratives enable people to strengthen certain parts of themselves/character traits. The field of narrative criminology has also emerged from the theory that narratives may influence how people act (Presser 2004).

## 3. Labelling

*'Side note; imagine if law enforcement would visit me the next days. They would probably get the wrong idea and think I was a terrorist, lol :o'* (Breivik)

*'I will be labelled as the biggest (Nazi) monster ever witnessed since WW2'* (Breivik)

Labelling theory asserts that people's actions are influenced by the labels that they are given. Lemert (1951) argues that a deviant label encourages further deviance, and Maruna (2004) provides evidence that people who are encouraged to distort the realities of their past lives and create a non-criminal sense of self are less likely to reoffend. Presser (2004) gives examples of criminals describing their crimes as moral blips in criminal lives. and avoiding embracing a criminal persona.

## 4. Blurring of the real self and the virtual self

*'WoW [World of Warcraft] no longer became a sanctuary where I could hide from the evils of the world, because the evils of the world had now followed me there.'* (Rodger)

*'I see MW2 [Modern Warfare 2] more as a part of my training-simulation than anything else. I've still learned to love it though and especially the multiplayer part is amazing. You can more or less completely simulate actual operations.'* (Breivik)

*'Prepare mentally for the nitration process. Don't start if you are physically tired or if you need to eat any time soon. Just prepare and if possible have a radio, TV or iPod at your disposal.'* (Breivik)

Breivik's guide to making explosives shares the linguistic features of a game 'walkthrough', and he discusses the use of first person shooter games to simulate reality. Rodger talks about the safety of his gaming world and is distraught when the real world infiltrates it.



There is some discussion in the literature of this blurring of the real and the virtual in relation to gaming. Mildenberger (2016) asserts that virtual killing can be wrong in some circumstances and examines the fictional agency and moral responsibility relating to it. Decker and Gay (2011) provide evidence that people who play computer games regularly have a cognitive bias towards gaming related words, and there were attempts by like-minded individuals to turn the livestream of the Christchurch killings in 2019 into a mock computer game (Bayer 2020).

## Conclusion

There are several strands to the analysis of the constancy of the self in narratives, and this may relate to how others view the self, or to comparison with past and, co-existing current or future selves. This can be woven into how a narrator navigates their moral agency. I would appreciate input on the following:

**What further reading may be useful?**  
**What corpus analysis may enable the researcher to explore this argument further.**

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