



Sex Lives in *Second Life*

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Second Life (SL) is a little hard to classify. It could be classified with other massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), because it shares several characteristics with these games. Multiple users from all over the world log onto SL and interact in a virtual environment. Users in SL also construct avatars, characters that function as in-game proxies, as do players in other MMORPGs. And like other MMORPGs, SL has an in-game economy that allows users to buy and sell various items and goods (Castronova, 2006). But when it comes to the actual "game" the comparison breaks down. First, there are no clearly defined role-play objectives in SL: no required missions, quests, or monsters to slay. Second, while the producers of many online commercial games discourage players from changing the elements of the game, users in SL are encouraged to manipulate the environment (Bartle, 2006). Although Linden Lab, the creative force behind SL, has established some rules and guidelines, users are able to build their own buildings, create their own clothing and accessories, and are usually at liberty to shape this virtual world in any way they see fit.

Consequently, SL has been used in a variety of ways, including educational and commercial applications, and as a means to interact with other people. Given the liberty available in SL, users have the opportunity to create new relationships, and create those relationships in new and different ways. Some SL users are taking advantage of this liberty to refigure gender and sexuality; when one of us first entered SL, we came upon a very large statue with prominent breasts and an erect penis; it was a shrine to "shemales," one that celebrated the sexual viability of transsexuals. Other SL users, however, reproduce traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and sometimes do so in disturbing ways.

We see SL as a valuable space in which to study gender and sexuality in cyberspace, because unlike traditional forms of print, film, or television media (hereafter, traditional media), SL users are primarily responsible for the content.¹ In other words, users have the agency to create the gender roles and the sexual experiences that they want. In many of the

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existing studies of gender and sexuality in cyberspace, this agency is theorized from a liberatory perspective that sees cyberspace as a unique social arena in which traditional gender roles and sexual norms are challenged and transgressed. Unfortunately, this theoretical perspective does not account for those who use their agency to reproduce the traditional roles and norms found in real life (RL).² . . .

Liberatory Perspective

The idea that cyberspace is a liberatory environment is certainly not new, and other scholars have challenged this idea (Gunkel, 2001). For our purposes, we are using the phrase “liberatory perspective” to refer to a critique of cyberspace that imagines it to be an arena in which subjects have greater agency to explore and refigure gender norms and sexual roles. When scholars first began studying relationships in cyberspace, there was a great deal of optimism about the potential for virtual environments to offer users opportunities to explore multiple identities. For example, Sherry Turkle (1995) looked at how users switched genders in online social environments, and how this gender switching allowed these users to assert new identities, and develop more empathy for the opposite gender. Allcurque're Rosanne Stone (1995) argued that online environments allowed for the exploration of fragmented identities, because subjects were able to operate independently of their bodies on which gender and sexual discipline has been exercised. She claims that successful gender switching online reveals both the instability of identity, and how new *media* “presaged radical changes in social conventions” (p. 81).³

. . . This liberatory perspective, however, teeters on the brink of technological determinism, and unfortunately cyberspace does not always provide an escape. Lynne Roberts and Malcolm Parks (2001) have

conducted one of the few social science studies about gender switching in cyberspace, and they found that the majority of people do not switch genders online. In addition, they found that some women switched genders in order to escape sexual harassment online. In these cases, gender switching may allow these women to escape, but this escape is merely a reaction to the reproduction of problematic RL sexual relations in cyberspace. This is not to suggest that cyberspace has not facilitated the potential for liberatory use. Indeed, scholars who have analyzed interactive online media contend that cyberspace has opened up opportunities for political resistance and community building, particularly for individuals with queer identities (Alexander, 2002; Bryson, 2004). . . .

In contrast to this liberatory perspective, queer scholars of traditional media have approached the representation of gender and sexuality with a healthy skepticism. For almost two decades, queer media scholars have examined how gender and sexual norms are reproduced, and how representation can function to exclude or contain sexual minorities (Battles & Hilton-Murrow, 2002; Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2001; Dow, 2001; Shugart, 2003; Sloop, 2004). These studies focused on traditional forms of media, in which the agency of representation is in the hands of media producers. New media scholars, however, are often quick to point out that users have the agency of production where interactive media is concerned, and they maintain that this shift in agency is a significant difference.

Interactivity and the Docile Body

In the studies of interactive media generally, a great deal has been written about the agency of the user. Some have associated this agency with ideological resistance, suggesting that interactivity allows users to escape and challenge the influences

associated with traditional media industries (Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Frasca, 2003). Other scholars question this agency (Brookey & Booth, 2006; Marshall, 2002), but where gender and sexuality are concerned, there are other influences that need to be considered. It is often the implicit assumption of queer scholars that traditional forms of media will cater to established norms in order to attract the broadest audience. Yet, these scholars acknowledge that these norms operate in larger social, cultural and political contexts, what Judith Butler (1990) would describe as a “heterosexual matrix,” a grid of gender rules and sexual laws that favor and enforce procreative heterosexuality. While interactivity might create different relationships between users and media producers, interactivity does not categorically remove users from the influence of this social matrix. For example, users in SL create their own characters (avatars), give them primary and secondary sex characteristics, dress them and determine their sexual practices. Indeed, when it comes to the construction of gender and sexuality in SL, the users exercise a great deal of control. These users, however, represent subjects whose identities have been formed by the way gender and sexuality are “disciplined” in society.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Michel Foucault (1978) outlines a program of discipline that explains how sexuality became a part of identity. He argues that with the rise of bourgeois society [historically, in the 19th century], there was thought to be a move to repress and censor the discussion of sex and sexuality (“the repressive hypothesis”), when in actuality a great deal of discourse emerged at this time articulating sexual norms, and delineating sexual perversity. In this discourse, sexual practice became an indicator of the psychological health of the individual, because sexuality was thought to reside in the psyche of the individual. Consequently, the individual was invested with the responsibility of maintaining proper sexual practices, and

seeking out help for perverse sexual behavior. In this way, the supposed social repression of sexuality resulted in a repression of sexuality within the psyche of the individual. Once sexuality was invested in the person, individuals aligned their sexual practices with established norms, and actively assumed the responsibility for their own sexual health. In other words, the sexual subject became a “docile body.”

Foucault (1975) argues that the docile body is not passive, but rather the active embodiment of disciplinary practices, becoming a self-disciplined body. The concept of docility also informs Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. She argues that individuals must constantly “perform” established gender norms, in order to escape the social discipline that is exercised against queer sexuality. In the repetition of the performance, the performativity of gender is forgotten, and the embodiment of gender norms is thought to be an expression of internal identity; in this way the gendered subject becomes a docile body.

Theorizing from Foucault and Butler, a fundamental problem with the liberatory perspective emerges. Although the disciplining of gender and sexuality may be exercised on the body, this discipline produces a sexual subject who imagines itself independent of the body. Liberating this subject from the body via cyberspace does not necessarily mean that this subject escapes the influential disciplinary practices that produced its identity. For example, Miroslaw Filiciak (2003, p. 100) posits that the creation of identities in cyberspace is not so much an escape from the “self” as it is “a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations.” We would add, however, that these expressions might not move beyond the gender roles and sexual norms that created the “self.”

Because docility is the underlying concept of performativity, we have chosen to use it in our analysis. Docility helps explain why individuals empowered with the agency

to produce their own sexual world might choose to perpetuate the established norms of gender and sexuality. We have chosen SL as an environment in which to apply this critical concept, because SL is an interactive virtual world in which users are primarily responsible for creating the sexual content. Our purpose is specific: to offer an alternative to the liberatory perspective on gender and sexuality in cyberspace. Therefore our claims will also be specific; we do not offer our observations in order to generalize about the SL environment. In fact, a general analysis of SL would be beyond the scope of this chapter, because the environment is too large, and the content created by its users is too diverse. Instead, we focus on two types of sexual content created by SL users.

First, we analyze how certain users render women as sexual objects, designed to be sexually attractive, sexually available and sexually subordinate to men. Second, we show how gay, lesbian, transgender and "Furry"⁴ users are marginalized in SL content, and in some instances participate in their own marginalization. To do so, we critically analyze advertisements and spaces in SL that we have found through our own exploration of SL.⁵ We also analyze *The Second Life Herald*, a blog founded by University of Toronto philosophy professor Peter Ludlow, which publishes articles written by SL users and allows other SL users to comment on the articles published. We include *The Second Life Herald* in our analysis because it comprises the opinions of actual SL users, and it gives us an additional metatext to which we can compare the content we have found in SL.⁶

Virtual Objectification

The avatar is often considered the embodiment of identity in cyberspace, and SL provides various means with which to design avatars. As Linden Lab suggests:

Second Life is about personal expression and your avatar is the most personal expression of all. After all, an avatar is your persona in the virtual world . . . Despite offering almost infinite possibilities, the tool to personalize your avatar is very simple to use and allows you to change anything you like, from the tip of your nose to the tint of your skin. Don't worry if it's not perfect at first, you can change your look at any time. (Linden Research, 2006)

Clearly, Linden Lab has decided to highlight the agency that users can find in SL, and they suggest that users seem to have unlimited options available to them in the construction of their online identities. Users construct their avatars through the appearance editor in SL, which allows them to adjust their avatars' appearance including the body shape, the skin, the hair, and the eyes. Although Linden Lab may claim that there are almost infinite possibilities for the manipulation of an avatar, the ability to create an avatar is initially limited in an important way. The avatar's gender is the first trait that a user must designate before editing other aspects of the avatar body; a user must check one of two boxes: male or female. Granted, a user may switch between these two genders with relative ease (and, as we will discuss later, hermaphroditism is possible), but the default options available to users are limited to two choices. As Ann Fausto-Sterling (2000) observed, this bifurcation of gender is supported by the tendency to dichotomize biological sex, a dichotomy not supported by the biological record that includes a multiplicity of examples that defy easy categorization. In SL, this dichotomy is reproduced, and these default options introduce the user into SL in the same way that a gendered subject is introduced into a RL heterosexual world divided up into women and men.

The user can also choose "shapes" or "skins," which can cover the avatar's body.

A shape will reconstruct the form of the avatar body (e.g., adding a well sculpted build to the body), while a skin allows a user to replace an avatar's skin color and can contour a body shape (e.g., skin tones that are pigmented and can contour the musculature of a shape for more depth). A user can also replace default clothing with designed pieces (e.g., clothing or other costumes purchased in shops), and can add attachments, items that can be linked to a particular part of an avatar's body (e.g., jewelry). The user can personally create clothing, body parts and attachments by constructing these objects in the SL environment; however, many users choose to purchase these objects in SL stores. . . . All transactions within SL are conducted with an in-game currency called "Linden Dollars," and users can either earn these dollars by "working" in SL, or they can buy them outright with RL currency (Linden Research 2007). SL users can transfer U.S. currency into Lindens to purchase items in SL, and users who become merchants and sell content are able to transfer Lindens into U.S. currency.

Many of the stores in SL offer clothing, swimwear and lingerie which accentuate feminine sexual attractiveness. One store sells "Evening Starr Formals," gowns that accentuate the female form with tight bodices and plunging necklines. This store also offers more casual attire, including miniskirts and tight-fitting slacks. Another store, "Liberte Fashion," offers a similar selection of clothes that accentuate the female body. It also offers a selection of bridal gowns, for those who choose to reproduce the tradition of marriage in the SL environment. The critique of marriage as a power-laden institution is well established in feminist literature, and we will not revisit it here. We would note, however, that some work has gone into the design of these wedding gowns, and at \$1,500 Lindens, SL users would have to work (either in SL or RL) in order to raise the money to purchase one. In other words,

a good deal of user agency is invested in the reproduction of the marriage tradition, in both the design and purchase of the dress.

Some of the clothing available for female avatars is modeled by the "Post 6 Grrls" in *The Second Life Herald*. The Post 6 Grrls are female avatars that are chosen to pose for "pictures" in which they are scantily dressed, posed provocatively, and often appear in the nude. The pictures are accompanied by short biographies, in which the Grrls discuss their likes and dislikes, as if they were the "Playmate of the Month." We should note that there are "Post 6" men, and robots as well, but the biographies of some of the Post 6 Grrls are as revealing as some of their pictures. For example, Kaylia Burgess (2007, ¶ 5), the Post 6 Grrl for March 9, 2007, lists the following interests: "I love fashion, makeovers, and just getting to know those I am close with (sic). And in SL, I can wear a bikini and lay on the beach all year round." Jabra Kostolany (2006, ¶ 4), the Post 6 Grrl for November 10, 2006, discusses what she would like to accomplish in SL: "One of the ideas is to make a woman's magazine like 'Cosmopolitan' for the Second Life woman. Woman (sic) need to know how to correct them and how to build and rebuild themselves (sic), where to buy, dresses, make-up and other accessories."⁷ In addition to presenting their avatars as sexual objects, these Post 6 Grrls also seem to believe that women should be valued for their appearance, and indicate that their own agency is caught up in the purchase of clothes and accessories. . . .

This same value system is also apparent in the sexual and fetish ware stores in SL. Various bondage clothing, harnesses, and other types of sexual attachments are available for purchase, and the images and advertisements that appear in the stores often depict women as sexually submissive. For example, BDSM [bondage and discipline, sadism and masochism] toys and accoutrements include objects like a bull-whip, buggy whip, cattle prod, "Gorean"

slave goad, spiked paddle, wooden paddle, cane, riding whip and hand crop. Any avatar can use these various toys, but female avatars are often depicted in the subordinate role in the advertisements. . . .

Actual sexual intercourse is available through various "pose balls" found in SL. Pose balls initiate directed animation, and are demarcated by colored balls that can be found in different areas of SL. When a user clicks on a pose ball, the avatar will move into the position and begin the animation that the pose ball directs. When pose balls are activated, the avatar will continue the movement, or sexual act, until the user directs the avatar to stop. Those pose balls that animate sexual positions are often color coded in ways that denote gender; for example, blue pose balls are usually for male participants, while red or pink balls are for female participants. Sexual pose ball colors also demarcate active and/or passive roles, and often the female role is the passive one. . . .

Several advertisements illustrate pose balls that include behaviors like "blowjobs" or "handjobs," and in these positions the female avatars service the male avatars. The sexual subjugation of women in SL is, however, perhaps best illustrated by the presence of advertisements for pose balls that allow avatars to engage in "roleplay rape." For example, a series of advertisements in the "M & P Shop" depicted two men who are engaged in the rape of a woman; one placed the woman on her hands and knees while she was orally and vaginally penetrated by two men, while another showed one man holding the woman by her shoulders while the other man held her legs in the air and penetrated her. On May 31, 2007 Linden Labs declared depictions of sexual violence, including rape, to be unacceptable, and the advertisements that once appeared in the M & P Shop were replaced with a posting that listed unacceptable content. Although they are not advertised, rape pose balls can still be found in other SL spaces, including the "Back Alley" area of "Bound &

Determined Fetish Club;" "Miss Lucie's Land of Fun and Fantasy" offers pose balls labeled "ravished" and "ravisher."

While the users with female avatars voluntarily participate in these rape scenes, just because the practice is volitional does not absolve it from critique. The fact that a user is complicit in the rape scene is very problematic, if we are to assume that a female user controls the female avatar. Such a scenario has implications more disturbing than the banal aspects of rape fantasy; it suggests that rape is just sexual play, in which the female is expected to say "no" even though she means "yes." Even more disturbing, however, is the possibility that the female avatar who "volunteers" for a rape scene or "ravishment" could be controlled by a man. The possible empathy generated by crossing genders withers in the light of this possibility: a man can create a female avatar with the purpose of having her submit to sexual violation and humiliation. In any case, it is important to note that users created these pose balls, and used their agency to construct a violent sexual experience.

In addition, there are the real world benefits available to SL users who have created this sexual content. Digital avatars and the content in SL become the intellectual property of their creators, and users can actually make RL money from creating and selling content in SL. . . .

Virtually Queer

When it comes to queer sexuality, it is not that such expressions are absent from SL. On the contrary, the visibility and presence of queer sexuality can be found in social spaces, sexual spaces, and market places. The "place" search function can be used to find queer spaces, just like other spaces in SL, and using this search function with the keywords "gay" or "lesbian" results in dozens of spaces and "islands." . . .

Islands in SL are similar to their RL equivalent, in that they are isolated from

other areas in SL; many of these queer spaces exist on islands disconnected from other areas, and some are even further isolated within areas on islands. One example of such a space is the "Bad Boys Club" (a club for gay men on "Munford Island"), which does not allow avatars to freely move between the club and other locations on the island. This club restricts avatars from either entering or leaving the club through the conventional means of movement (walking and flying); thus this club cannot be entered unintentionally. Instead, a user must "teleport" into the club. (Teleporting occurs when a user jumps to a new location by entering spatial coordinates.) Some places in SL cannot be entered in any other way, and therefore a user must know the coordinate address to enter these spaces. When queer spaces restrict entry in this manner, it is reminiscent of early times in the gay community, when clubs, in order to protect the anonymity of their patrons, would only post the street address by the door, but offer no other signage. As then, to enter some queer spaces in SL, a user must know the exact address.

It is likely that many of these queer spaces are isolated because they rarely restrict sexual content. Sexual content permeates these queer spaces, whether they cater to males or females, and these spaces typically have sex clubs, or places for sexual activities, and contain shops that sell sexual paraphernalia. Sex clubs differ in style depending on each space and whether the content is for male or female avatars. The way that these sexual spaces are constructed is not always the same, but common elements appear. Many of the gay male spaces have a sex club within the vicinity of the dance floor, and lesbian sex spaces are often constructed similarly to gay male spaces. Many of these spaces, however, are segregated by gender; there are gay spaces that are designated for "men only," such as "Bad Boys Club" or "Devil Inside," and there are lesbian spaces that are labeled "women only," such as "Ruby Bayou Ladies Club" and "Pink Passions." The explicit segregation

of genders in SL is unique to queer spaces, and ensures that the sexual activity within these spaces does not include heterosexual behaviors. In this way, however, queers construct and congregate in spaces that ensure their isolation, and thereby reproduce their own marginalization.

Not every queer area or space includes sexual paraphernalia and/or sex clubs. "The L Word Island" is a reconstruction of a neighborhood from the Showtime cable television series *The L Word*, and this island does not offer any sexual content. The various shops on this island offer clothing (for both men and women), as well as skins and hair. This island is one of the few queer islands that seem to place an emphasis on relationships over sexual intercourse; the presence of a speed-dating lounge points to this emphasis. It is possible that Showtime, the owner of the island, wanted to restrict sexually explicit content, but this would suggest that the motive behind the construction of this queer space is different from other queer spaces in SL. This space has been developed to promote a television show, so restriction of sexual content may only serve the commercial interests of Showtime.

Therefore, we need to recognize that some queer sexuality in SL may not be designed for the interests of the sexual minorities represented. For example, in some of the sex clubs and dungeons that cater to heterosexuals, it is common to find pose balls for female-on-female sexual animations. While there is a prevalence of female-female and female-female-male pose balls in these spaces, male-male pose balls are not present. The absence of gay male sexual opportunities in these spaces might indicate that these particular instances of lesbian sexuality are being offered up for the pleasure of male heterosexuals. (Lesbian sex scenes are prevalent in the pornography marketed to heterosexual men, and it would seem that these lesbian pose balls are placed to create sexual acts primarily for the desires of heterosexual men, and not lesbians.) This is not to suggest that all

lesbian sex in SL is served up for male heterosexual pleasure, because there are “women only” spaces where men cannot observe lesbian acts. Even in these contexts, however, we cannot assume that all of the female avatars signify female users; some may be cross-dressed male users enjoying lesbian experiences.

As we have mentioned, when a user begins SL, they can choose an avatar of the opposite sex, and use all of the clothing and attachments available in SL to construct the avatar. Not everyone, however, welcomes these transgender avatars in SL; for example, some men who patronize escorts in SL want to make certain the women they solicit have been created, and are played, by women in RL. In fact, a voice verification system has been set up so that female escorts in SL can be certified “GVF” (Gender-Verified Female) (Elliott, 2006). Therefore, voice becomes the ultimate gender signifier, separating the “real” women from the transgendered, and once again anchoring gender in biological sex.

Unfortunately for those who use SL to explore transgender experiences, voice has become an important issue. Integrated voice technology was recently made available to SL users; and this technology allows people to talk to one another, rather than using the text chat function. Some SL users who cross-dress saw this new technology as a threat to their existence in SL. For example, in *The Second Life Herald*, Prokofy Neva (2007, ¶ 15) writes about the harassment that transgender users already experience, and notes “Being forced to use a voice in a virtual world, something not of my choice, against my will . . . feels like the ultimate blow. It won’t be—but you do get tired of this crap after awhile.” In another *Second Life Herald* article, Aurel Miles mentions the ways that “shemales” can be identified in SL. A commenter to this article writes, “All of you are fussing over something that’s going to be moot shortly anyways (sic). As soon as Voice Chat is rolled out you’ll see the number of gender benders suddenly dissolve” (realityfish,

2007, ¶ 62). As the comment reveals, this SL user looks to this technological change as a way of reasserting heterosexuality in SL. After all, the use of voice to identify the biological sex of users is a way to ensure that biological males will only interact sexually with biological females, and in this way, voice technology can be deployed to reduce the instances of queer sex.

The issue of voice in this controversy takes on a strange irony. Voice has often been equated with agency, and the act of speaking for oneself has been characterized as an act of visibility, and a sign of political viability (Morris, 2007). This is true of marginalized groups generally, and sexual minorities specifically; the slogan of AIDS activism, “Silence = Death”, illustrates the point. The deployment of voice technology will allow the transgender users to be heard in SL, and will make them visible. Unfortunately, this visibility may be turned against transgender users, so the agency of voice becomes the material for marginalization. Therefore some of these transgender users do not want their voices to be heard, because they do not want to be recognized as transgender. In this way, silence becomes a means of survival in SL, and the political potential of queer voice and visibility is turned on its head. Still, while we are sympathetic to the plight of transgender users in SL, the decision to eschew voice chat accommodates a heteronormative demand that queers should be neither heard, nor seen. . . .

Same Old Game

At the beginning of this chapter, we discussed how it was difficult to classify SL as a game. Where the issues of gender and sexuality are considered, the question may be moot because the “play” in SL is quite serious. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) explains that the performative nature of gender does not mean that the performance of gender does not matter. On the contrary, these performances constitute

our identities, and locate us as sexual subjects in society. The gender and sexual play that we have observed in SL could also be regarded as part of a game, but we would argue that it is a game that matters. The users who perform these actions are identifying themselves as sexual subjects, and identifying others as sexual objects.

Given the agency to create their own sexual experiences, some users have chosen to create experiences that objectify women and marginalize queers. The possibility that heterosexual men would construct these experiences comes as no surprise; the possibility that both women and queers might assist in the construction is more surprising. Indeed, the enactment of self-subjugation and self-marginalization would seem to be the ultimate expression of docility. Women, who have chosen to construct identities in SL only to serve themselves up as objects of sexual desire, reassert an existing belief system that limits the value of women. Queers who have cloistered themselves on an isolated island, often segregated by gender, have complied with the heteronormative demand to keep their practices private.

Consequently, our analysis illustrates some problems with the liberatory perspective. To view cyberspace as liberatory rewrites RL as inherently repressive, and this is evident in some of the comments that we have discussed, where users refer to SL as a space where they are free to express themselves. Unfortunately, if cyberspace is liberatory, and SL specifically, then how do we challenge the politically retrograde content without inviting the charge of repression? After all, complaints about “political correctness” have been used to mock and undermine feminist and queer critiques of cultural representation in RL. Foucault argued that while it was possible to resist the sexual norms of society, it was not possible to move outside of the relations of power produced by the disciplining of sexuality. Consequently, he had his own suspicions about the liberatory promise of the sexual revolution of the sixties and

seventies, and he warned: “(w)e must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power” (1978, p. 157). Arguing from Foucault, we suggest that cyberspace should not be regarded as an environment that moves the user outside of the political and social matrix of gender and sexuality. Cyberspace may allow us to rework those power relationships, but we cannot assume that liberation is obtained there, nor can we overlook the instances that clearly reproduce traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and willful sexual violence.

Applying Foucault’s warning to SL, perhaps we should not think that by saying “yes” to cybersex, we are saying “no” to power. Indeed, we should not look to cyberspace as a universal panacea. Granted, technology can be quite attractive, and it would be nice to imagine that escape from oppression, and relief from violence is a mere keystroke away. The problems associated with gender and sexuality are RL social problems that predate the technology of SL, and therefore we should be mindful that the solutions to those problems might lie in RL as well. If our analysis reveals anything, it is that while SL may appear new and exciting, where gender and sexuality are concerned, too often it is the same old game.

Notes

1. We recognize that the term “traditional media” increasingly becomes a problematic term as various mediums begin to converge. Yet, we make this distinction to illustrate a difference between representations that are created within media by media producers versus representations that are created by users of an interactive medium.

2. Admittedly, the term “real life” is problematic, and we are aware of the debate about surrounding the distinctions draw between the real world and the virtual one. The players of SL, however, use this term, so we are merely reproducing a distinction that is made by these

players—the distinction of a virtual “second life” in contradistinction to the “first life” lived by flesh bodies.

3. Stone’s observations are influenced by the work of Donna Haraway (1991), who has conceptualized the cyborg as a modern border/ed body (between animal, man, machine, and physicality) that has the potential to deconstruct hegemonic power. She specifically noted a possibility to imagine a world without gender or genesis. We do not feel, and will argue, that this rather Utopian possibility has come to fruition within SL.

4. The queerest of the queer in SL may be the “Furries.” Furries are avatars that are anthropomorphic animals; they often have the body shape of humans, but the heads and fur of animals. Linden Lab has even made a furry avatar an option available to new users.

5. Both authors of this project have spent a considerable amount of time exploring the virtual SL environment. One has been a member of SL since December 9, 2006; the other has been a member since May 26, 2006. Each author has investigated various SL islands to obtain pertinent information for this article. Collectively we have spent approximately 140 hours in-world as active participants in SL. We should note that because the content in SL is user created, it is in constant flux, and we cannot be certain that the same content will be available in SL at the time of publication. Still, the content that we critique was created by users, and our argument is about the agency of creation.

6. James Gillett (2007) has demonstrated this integration of analyses of visual texts and blogs.

7. We are well aware of the fact that some of these female avatars are constructed and controlled by male players. Indeed, this possibility raises other concerns that we address later in the article.

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