

Our Bodies, Our (Virtual) Selves

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DEDICATION

To the Wolfs, the Hills, the Nortons, and Jenna, my family by birth and by choice

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ABSTRACT

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In Second Life, the body is both created and performed. In some ways, Second Life identities are even more telling than offline identities, given that all elements are defined by the user. This study investigates three intersecting elements of selfhood in Second Life: first, the differences (or lack thereof) between constructions of identity in Second Life and actual life; second, the ways in which users express a gendered self in a realm where everything, even gender and genitalia, is infinitely mutable; third, whether Second Life's virtual body allows participants to move away from restrictive notions of gender, or reinforces a narrow conception of gender that is grounded in the body. Using interview data, content analysis, and participant observation, this thesis concludes that Second Life simultaneously reifies gendered bodily ideals while allowing individuals to explore their own gender and sexuality within these ideals. Gendered body norms are further narrowed by an environment where bodies are constructed by individuals invoking the cultural meanings of appearance.

1. Introduction

“When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass.” – Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen, p177

Increasingly, life is being conducted not only in the physical world, but in the virtual one, as well. Created in 2003 by Linden Labs, Second Life is a combination game, social network, and alternate reality, inspired by the cyberpunk literary movement. In Second Life, users create not just a profile of themselves, but entire virtual bodies that represent some aspect of how they wish to be perceived. This may or may not be a representation of the self who exists in the actual world. In Second Life, the body is both created and performed. Gender, shape, size, and appearance are all variable. Certainly, many offline understandings of gender are expressed online. Yet in some ways, Second Life identities are even more telling of self-conceptions than offline identities, given that all elements are defined by the user. Second Life allows the creation of a culture entirely outside the bounds of real-world social consequences, economy, or physical limitations. However, this “real-world” baggage also informs its organization. So when given the opportunity to use technology to create identities, how do people use virtual bodies to express gender and gender to express identity in the world of Second Life?

In this study, I investigate three intersecting elements of selfhood in Second Life: first, the differences (or lack thereof) between constructions of identity in Second Life

and actual life; second, the ways in which users express a gendered self in a realm where everything, even gender and genitalia, is infinitely mutable; third, whether Second Life's virtual body allows participants to move away from restrictive notions of gender, or reifies a narrow conception of gender that is grounded in the body. Second Life has enormous potential to destabilize monolithic definitions of gender and identity, allowing the possibility of fluid, partial identity/identities, but this potential may not be realized by a userbase that is largely a product of contemporary society.

Through participant observation, personal interviews, and qualitative content analysis, I hope to get at the ways in which Second Life users perform gender through virtual embodiment, and the ways in which these performances destabilize or reinforce existing notions of gender identity. While cyberculture has its own revolutionary potential, it often falls short of this potential. Can we ever hope for more flexibility in gender and embodiment, even when those elements are strictly self-defined? Or will dominant beliefs about gender prevail?

Background

I've been a member of various online communities since I was a teenager. In each community, I found myself again being asked to define myself, either through text, as in a typical Facebook or MySpace profile, or through the virtual body, as in Second Life. As I became more interested in feminism and feminist theory, I became increasingly intrigued by this process of self-identification. What meaning could gender possibly have online, where all identities are self-defined, and many are fiction, anyway? Early writings about cyberculture idealistically suggested that perhaps the Internet would be a

way to escape racism, sexism, and the other systems of power that have historically oppressed various groups of people – simply disembodiment everyone, and suddenly race, sex, disability and other categories of embodiment could disappear! Of course, this utopic hope was short-lived and never realized, in part because it rested upon the assumption that these identities reside solely in the body. Yet it is referred to again and again, particularly in articles on Second Life. Journalistic accounts of Second Life love to expound on the ways that Second Life can free users from real-world boundaries (see Boss 2007; Gross 2006; or Skilos 2006): Avatars can fly! No one dies! You can be any size or shape you want! The disconnect between my own observations about the relative flexibility of gender online and the utopic possibilities of online culture and the vastly different actual experiences of others and myself in online communities drew me to this line of inquiry. While some quantitative research has been undertaken on the different experiences of men and women online (most notably about threats of violence against women online), and ethnographic research has been conducted about various online communities, less ethnographic research has been done specifically around gender issues online. With the advent of the kind of virtual embodiment and the assumed accompanying gender expression and performance that Second Life allows, I believe this is a critical moment to examine the experiences of gender expression online.

Second Life is an incredibly popular online activity. When I logged on recently, Linden Labs reported that in the last 60 days, 1,469,729 players had logged on. On a Monday afternoon in March of 2010, there were more than 64 thousand users online. Users (sometimes known as “Residents”) create characters (known as “avatars”), make

friends, hold jobs, and have fun. While an individual may have more than one avatar, thus making it nearly impossible to estimate the number of Second Life players, the number is certainly not trivial. Moreover, Second Life is only one of many online games generally referred to as Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Games (MMORPGs) or Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVES). There are virtually no strictures on behavior. There is little to no regulation, and even the laws of physics and biology don't apply: Residents can fly or choose robotic or animal appearances. Advanced users can choose even more abstract appearances, but most choose to appear humanoid. In Second Life, one is asked to choose a gender before beginning the game, but gender can easily be changed later by the click of a button, though it can only be toggled between two genders. Genitalia are considered separate objects from the body; they must be purchased (with small amounts of actual money), but once a participant has some, it is simple to switch between different genital configurations. It is similarly simple to change almost any aspect of appearance. If a Resident doesn't wish to go through the work of designing a look for her or his avatar, clothes, shapes, or entire bodies to wear can be purchased at various websites for very little money, creating a vast consumer culture around appearance.

Literature Review

As an extremely popular virtual world, Second Life has attracted a large community dedicated to research in various academic disciplines. While Second Life-specific studies are still quite new, older approaches to cybercultures, gender, and selfhood provide a rich background for exploring Second Life from a critical

perspective. The threefold goal of this study is comprised of investigating differences between virtual and actual identities, virtual gender expression, and the potential for postmodern selfhood through Second Life. In particular, I want to draw upon the voices and accounts of Second Life users, known as Residents, to unravel an understanding of how these processes operate. This literature review will focus on five themes that are important for understanding gender in Second Life: the virtual and the real, performance and gender, gender and the body, the virtual body, and the postmodern self.

The Virtual and the Real

In *Cybercultures* (2001), Pierre Levy provides one of the first critical looks at virtual worlds. Although most virtual worlds at the time of his writing were text-based, instead of intensely graphical virtual worlds like Second Life, he provides a definition of virtual worlds, saying that they can “faithfully simulate the real world... [They] can allow the explorer to construct a virtual image that is very different from his or her physical appearance in everyday life” (2001, 53). His descriptions of early virtual worlds immediately invokes the virtual individual, often referred to as an avatar. Levy places importance on the avatar. Levy is suggesting that virtual worlds give users new ways of approaching and creating information about themselves, each other, and the world around them. They allow for a kind of flexibility in self-construction that may not otherwise be possible. He does not directly address how this flexibility might affect gender expression within virtual worlds.

Virtual worlds are frequently dismissed as “fake” or “imaginary”, less important than what goes on in the “real world”. Several authors (Boellstorff 2008; Levy 2001;

Turkle 1995) refute the often-presumed dichotomy between the virtual and the real, a dichotomy which suggests that the virtual is somehow not real. Instead, they juxtapose the virtual and the actual as both being subsets of the real. This allows for a discussion of similarities, differences, and relationships between that which happens through technological mediation, and that which happens in the physical world, without privileging one over the other, or ignoring how the production of virtual worlds occurs in the actual world. Boellstorff notes that while Second Life users frequently use phrases like "real life" or "the real world" colloquially, these phrases are typically meant to distinguish offline interactions from online ones, not to establish Second Life as less-than-real. "Virtual worlds increasingly have 'real' ramifications – a business, an education course, an online partner becoming a 'real' spouse. As one person Second Life put it, 'our virtual relationships are just as real as our rl [real life] ones.' Such ramifications take advantage of the gap between virtual and actual. They do not blur or close that gap, for their existence depends upon the gap itself" (Boellstorff 2008, 20-21). As subsets of the real, virtual worlds assume legitimacy as a site of study. They are another venue and means of expressing identity, forming community and culture, and participating in society. Anne Balsamo writes, "Although the body may disappear representationally in virtual world – indeed, we may go to great lengths to repress it and erase its referential traces – it does not disappear ... in the phenomenological frame of the user" (1996, 126). This is why, despite Boellstorff's useful method of evaluating Second Life culture on its own terms, I feel that a discussion of the actual-world body is still required, and a comparison between avatars and material bodies is necessary. It is not

my goal to call out users for misrepresentation – indeed, this issue of “honesty” and “deception” is a thorny one – but instead to reincorporate the material body into a realm where it is claimed that one may allow it to disappear.

One theoretical framework for accomplishing this is that of the cyborg, as described by Donna Haraway. Haraway focuses more on the individual in relation to technology than on any particular technology or technologically-mediated community.

In her work, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Haraway presents the metaphor of the cyborg, an entity that is part human and part machine. She claims that we are all cyborgs, that is, "fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (1991, 150), arguing against essentialism of any kind, especially gender essentialism. In Haraway's work, new technology is an opportunity to reconsider our understanding of what it means to be human, and, for feminists, what it means to be a woman, and to question gender essentialism. I plan to investigate users as cyborgs, whose bodies and social interactions may be a complex mix of machine-based and based in the physical world.

Performance and Gender

The idea that identity is not simply an attribute, but something that we create by doing is the central theme to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) by Erving Goffman. Goffman examines in detail the ways in which we present ourselves in social interactions. While his work significantly predates the kinds of virtually embodied performances that occur in Second Life, the foundational concepts of the performance of

identity in social encounters that he discusses are relevant to the ways in which both of these kinds of performances occur.

Goffman writes,

When an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect.... The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is, and as to what they ought to see as the “is” (1959, 13).

So, by one's performance of self, one makes claims to certain kinds of selfhood, and expects to be accepted as such in social situations. Additionally, one makes the claim to have the authority to make these identity claims, and to have them accepted as authentic. It is this claim to authority and authenticity that then must be accepted or rejected by one's audience.

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman examine these claims as they specifically apply to gender in interaction in “Doing Gender”:

Accordingly, virtually any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature. And note, to “do” gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment*. Though it is individuals who do gender, the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, for accountability is a feature of social relationships, and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted (2002, 13).

In West and Zimmerman's view, gender is a performance accomplished interactionally. Individuals make claims to particular conceptions of gender, and then are assessed in their success or failure. Each claim made, each performance done, risks that assessment. “It is this risk of assessment – accountability – that shapes and drives the production of

gender, whether in conformity or deviance, and however it is defined in the situation” (West and Zimmerman 2002, 195). All gender is done with an eye towards how it will be read by others. But even though gender is done by individuals, the conceptions of gender themselves are far larger than these individual claims; they are situationally and institutionally bound.

These claims include claims to certain accepted gender schemata, as explored by Judith Butler. In addition to Goffman, Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) builds upon the work of a variety of major theorists, including Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, John L. Austin, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva. Butler examines these writers' theories in-depth, using their work as building blocks to arrive at her conclusion that gender is a performance, a set of linguistic acts that constitute identity, rather than expressions that reflect a pre-existing gender identity. She writes,

Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed (Butler 1990, 24-25).

Within this definition, gender becomes fluid, something that is constantly being constituted and reconstituted through its own enactment; it is reflexive in an ethnomethodological sense, in that it comes into existence through its own performance.

While it may be expressed bodily, it is not necessarily coupled to the material body. Yet, she notes that the body itself may be changed and constructed by the performance of gender, becoming a cultural sign as much as it is a material entity. She writes, "Always

already a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction. The fantasized body can never be understood in relation to the body as real; it can only be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the 'literal' and the 'real'" (Butler 1990, 71). This is particularly pertinent in the context of a discussion on virtual bodies, where there is a danger of the naturalization of the physical body while assuming the construction of the virtual body. Butler's argument is that all bodies are inherently cultural constructions, regardless of their materiality. Therefore, the virtual body is as much an invocation of a gendered subject as is the physical body.

Gender and the Body

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1990), Foucault argues that the body is a site of discipline by discursive power. He writes that one way in which power over life is deployed is "centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines*: an *anatomo-politics of the human body*" (1990, 139). According to Foucault, various systemic powers are played out by affecting the body and its functions. The body becomes an object over which political power is exercised.

Butler builds on this analysis by examining the ways in which gender is produced by the body. "The body' [is] itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable

existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will" (1990, 8)? Here Butler argues that bodies do not and cannot exist in a pre-gendered state. Markers or signifiers of gender are necessary for a body to be perceived and understood. The body is perceived as an expression of social meanings, particularly meanings about gender. In *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Susan Bordo examines the ways in which bodies are expected or forced to conform to various norms, particularly those of femininity for women. She claims that bodies are a site of "everyday deployment of mass cultural representations of masculinity, femininity, beauty, and success" (1993, 24). She writes,

The construction of femininity is written in disturbingly concrete, hyperbolic terms: exaggerated, extremely literal, at times virtually caricatured presentations of the ruling feminine mystique. The bodies of disordered [disorders discussed include hysteria, anorexia, and agorophobia] women in this way offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter – a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender (169).

Both Butler and Bordo argue that the body is seen as a cultural marker of one's gender identity, not simply because of the shape of one's genitals, but in other ways: hair, facial features, secondary sex characteristics, even expressions and bodily actions indicate gender. Pierre Bourdieu argues much the same in *Distinction: A Social Critique on the Judgment of Taste* (1984). Tracking the differences in habits between various genders and classes, and the differences in both the material body and bodily perceptions across

class, Bourdieu emphasizes that the gendered body is a means for expressing and naturalizing class differences.

Bordo also challenges Cartesian dualism, which is so often invoked in discussions of online identity. From the standpoint of dualism, the body is brought into being, controlled, and maintained by the “immaterial will”. If body and will are separate, and will is privileged, as Bordo argues, the body becomes an object which must be controlled and shaped, properly (or improperly) presented, as Butler suggests. Bordo writes, “the body is the locus of *all that threatens our attempts at control*. It overtakes, it overwhelms, it erupts and disrupts. This situation, for the dualist, becomes an incitement to battle the unruly forces of the body, to show it who is boss” (1993, 145). From a dualist perspective that privileges mind over body, one's body must be subject to one's will, and thus is an expression of the self. In separating the body and the will, there becomes a body that pre-exists the will, one that is wholly natural. But Judith Lorber and Lisa Jean Moore state that there is no “natural” body. “All women’s [and men’s] bodies are made in conformity or resistance or inventive adaptation to social norms and expectations” (2006, 106). The natural body is also dismissed by Anne Balsamo: “Bodybuilding, colored contact lenses, liposuction, and other technological innovations have subtly altered the dimensions and markers of what counts as a “natural” body. Even as techno-sciences provides the realistic possibility of replacement of body parts, it also enables a fantastic dream of immortality and control over life and death” (1996, 1). This dualist perspective is one that was popular in early works about virtual identity and culture, the utopian promise of equality through disembodiment, but given the

introduction of bodies into virtual worlds and contemporary theories about embodiment, it is no longer complex enough to explain the bodily experiences of residents of virtual worlds. Users can no longer be said to be disembodied in online worlds, and thus the supposed exertion of will over the body is a reflection of the culturally determined shapes of coherently gendered bodies, or the transgression of these norms. There is no pre-existing self, no “natural” body, only bodies and selves that have been made coherent through existing gender schemata.

The Virtual Body

Initially, the Internet was seen as a “disembodying technology” (Illouz 2007, 75), a way of escaping the confines of the body. In *Life on the Screen* (1995), Sherry Turkle’s work on virtual identity, one of her subjects asks, ““why grant such superior status to the self that has the body when the selves that don’t have bodies are able to have different kinds of experiences” (1995, 14)? Similarly, N. Katherine Hayles writes, “The thirty million Americans who are plugged into the Internet increasingly engage in virtual experiences enacting a division between the material body that exits on one side of the screen and the computer simulacra that seem to create a space inside the screen” (1999, 20). While this number is no longer accurate, the point that simulacra seem to be created inside the digital world still stands. Eva Illouz examines how disembodying one’s identity can become an impediment in online dating in “Romantic Webs,” given that romantic interactions rely on both compatible personalities and embodied attraction. Yet as technology has improved and Internet connection speeds increased, advances in video and graphics have allowed users to have a sense of virtual embodiment.

Given Butler's contention,

Sex is made understandable through the signs that indicate how it should be read or understood. These bodily indicators are the cultural means by which the sexed body is read. They are themselves bodily, and they operate as signs, so there is no easy way to distinguish between what is 'materially' true and what is "culturally" true about a sexed body (2004, 87),

virtual bodies can be viewed as a collection of cultural bodily signs. Boellstorff's identification of Second Life as a site of creativity and creation suggests a need for investigation of the creative forces at work on the body within the context of cultural ideas about sex and gender. "[Avatars] were the modality through which Residents experienced virtual selfhood... The idea of an avatar usually implies an embodiment that is intentionally crafted...and thus a 'zone of relationality' between persons (Weinstone 2004:40)... Avatars could also express durable aspects of self-identity (Çapin et al.1999-6; see also Damer 1998; Kushner 2004)" (2008, 129). Here, Boellstorff presents the avatar as a way of expressing embodiment and the cultural meanings of the body in a virtual realm. In Boellstorff's formulation, the cultural signs that Butler discusses above are not absent even when the material body may be. Hayles suggests that the cultural meanings are played out not solely on the virtual body, but in the complex relationship between materiality and virtuality: "We can acquire resources with which to rethink the assumptions underlying virtuality, and we can recover a sense of the virtual that fully recognizes the importance of the embodied processes constituting the lifeworld of human beings. In the phrase 'virtual bodies,' I intend to allude to the historical separation between information and materiality and also to recall the embodied processes that resist this division" (1999, 20). While there are often differences between virtual and actual

bodies, we cannot regard the two as separate or unrelated. We may conceive of materiality and virtuality as separate, but Hayles tells us that they are not.

In *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators* (2007), Robbie Cooper displays photographs of avatars from various MMORPGs and MUVES juxtaposed with photographs of their creators (a sample of which can be seen in Appendix B). In doing so, he makes obvious the visual similarities and the differences between the two. While some clearly make no attempts at mimicking humanity at all (for instance, the Flying Spaghetti Monster is simply a cloud of noodles with two meatballs for eyes), most avatars are humanoid in their appearance, and have at least a few features in common with their creators – hair color, or clothes, or skin tone. This makes the contrast between the two even more glaring. Without the materiality of the actual body, the avatar becomes a site of solely cultural meanings, and the gap between the cultural and the material senses of self becomes evident. Balsamo frames these differences thusly:

What is becoming increasingly clear in encounters with virtual reality [VR] applications is that visualization technologies no longer simply mimic or represent reality – they virtually recreate it. But the difference between the reality constructed in VR worlds and the reality constructed in the everyday world is a matter of epistemology, not ontology. They are both cultural as well as technological constructions, fully saturated by the media and other forms of everyday technologies. With respect to VR, it no longer makes sense to ask whose reality/perspective is represented in the various VR worlds, the industry, or the subculture; rather we should ask what reality is created therein, and how this reality articulates relationships between technologies, bodies, and cultural narratives (1996, 125).

This is especially true in light of Second Life's reliance on user-generated content and technology; it is not reasonable to ask what Linden Labs has created. Instead, we must ask what reality is being created by the users. The gap between the actual and the virtual

mirror the gap between the material and cultural senses of self, and provide glimpses of the cultural narratives that have been created in virtual worlds.

Partial Identities and the Post-Modern Self

Pierre Levy's primary thesis is that cyberculture is universal (that is, universally accessible and created) without being totalizing and making claims to absolute truths. He claims that cyberculture allows for a multiplicity of partial truths in all subjects, from identity claims to projections about evolution. I question if this multiplicity of partial truths creates the possibility of destabilizing other supposed cultural truths that are assumed monolithic, especially those around gender and identity. If gender must be reconstructed online in order to be "read" within cyberculture, does it make the process of gender performance any more transparent and obvious? Or do the same forces that make gender seem "natural" offline play out within cyberculture, as well?

Haraway uses her metaphor of the cyborg to suggest a post-modern kind of selfhood, one that is always partial and contextual, never complete or static. Butler concurs, and suggests that gender performance could be the way in which these destabilized identities can be experienced: "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized. Indeed, it may be that the very apparatus that seeks to install the norm also works to undermine that very installation, that the installation is, as it were, definitionally incomplete" (Butler 2004, 42). While remaining cognizant of the potential for distress and violence inherent in

presenting a non-normative gender identity, Butler remains hopeful that gender may present an opportunity for formation of a post-modern self.

Sherry Turkle claims that virtual identities can become part of a "decentered self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time" (1995, 14). In her examination of early MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons, which are text-based and pre-date graphical MUVes like *Second Life*), Turkle suggests that playing these various selves, particularly those of opposite-sex avatars can "enable [players] to explore previously unexamined aspects of their sexuality or [to] challenge their ideas about a unitary self" (1995, 49). Thus, virtual identity can illustrate the idea of the conglomeration of partial selves that Butler, Haraway, and other theorists have long been suggesting as a framework.

While Illouz suggests that the Internet has the capacity to enable a postmodernization of the self, she questions whether or not it actually does so. She argues that "the Internet revives with a vengeance the old Cartesian dualism between mind and body, with the only real locus for thought and identity being in the mind" (2007, 81). She argues that because users often rely on textual self-description, particular cultural scripts of desirability are invoked and reified, and the user's identity is perceived as total and stable, however accurate or inaccurate that may be. Balsamo also concerns herself with the ways in which technology represses the material body and gives the illusion of a stable, singular identity. Balsamo suggests that denial of the material body displays a gender bias: "The phenomenological experience of cyberspace depends upon and in fact requires the willful repression of the material bodies.... From a feminist

perspective it is clear that the repression of the material body belies a gender bias in the supposedly disembodied (and gender-free) world of virtual reality” (1996, 123). Second Life users create complex relationships between the material body and the virtual body, both of which affect their experiences of gendered selfhood. I plan to examine Second Life users’ experiences of gender and selfhood, both in- and out-of-world, to further investigate these possibilities.

Methods

I approached these questions from a feminist ethnographic viewpoint. Feminist ethnography is concerned with both allowing otherwise-unheard voices to speak, and uses feminist theoretical lenses to analyze ethnographic data. While any given Second Life Resident may or may not be a member of a historically oppressed group or groups, I embarked on this research in search of intersubjectivity, allowing Residents to speak and tell their stories of life online. I also consider this research feminist because it is centered on questions of gender expression and performance.

I primarily used in-depth interviews to learn more about users own conceptions of their gender identities and gender expressions, both in and out of Second Life. In his ethnography, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), Tom Boellstoff chooses to interact with Residents purely within Second Life. He defends this decision as taking Second Life culture on its own terms. If the culture exists without users meeting face-to-face, purely within the game, then why should he need to meet these users in order to understand the culture? While I understand this line of reasoning, the questions that I am asking suggested a different approach. Because I am concerned with the experience of

the body within Second Life, and the relation of actual-life gender presentation to online presentation, it was important to meet subjects in actual life as much as possible. This also avoided the difficult issue of obtaining informed consent from avatars, whose players may or may not be of age or be in certain risk groups without my knowledge. I used pseudonyms for both respondents and their avatars, each of whom may prefer not to be identified in my work.

I found respondents through several channels. I sent an open call for respondents through the Second Life Education (SLED), Second Life Research (SL-R), and DC Web Women (DCWW) listservs, as well as the Virginia Society for Technology in Education (VSTE). I also reached out to users I knew, and used the snowball sampling method, asking each if they knew others that they thought would be interested in being interviewed. I met all respondents in-person, and some in Second Life as well. I conducted nine interviews with both men and women. All were white, American, and presumably cisgender and heterosexual. This is a significant limitation to the generalizability of any data gathered, but one I wanted to be clear and transparent about. However, the lack of diversity, especially racial diversity, is not surprising. Although it is impossible to know for sure, it seems that Americans who use Second Life are overwhelmingly white. While Second Life is popular in certain Asian countries a language and distance barrier prevented me from interviewing Second Life users from these cultures. But even given that all interviews were conducted in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, African-Americans and Hispanic and Latino Americans are sorely underrepresented.

I supplemented my interview data with participant observation and content analysis. I have my own Second Life avatar, and have created others for the purpose of this project. I was already a member of the Second Life academic community, through participation in listservs and research meetings in-world. I spent more time in non-academic settings and with various Second Life friends, both enjoying the community Second Life has to offer, and learning more about the culture of this virtual world. I also used third-person narratives and images (primarily from *Alter Ego*) as a site of analysis.

In the second chapter, I will discuss the differences between the actual and virtual bodies and their associated senses of identity. While there are often large gaps in visual similarities between users and their avatars, the relationship of actual to virtual identity is far more complicated and nuanced. In the third chapter, I will examine how Second Life allows for flexibility around gender in some arenas, mainly gendered behavior, but users continue to produce identity within a strict set of bodily gender norms that are primarily borne from mainstream Western gender ideals and beauty standards. These suggest some particular cultural meanings of gendered bodies, which I unpack in chapter four, examining the strategic moves that respondents have made to make particular identity claims. Together, these build a picture of a new technologically-mediated world with enormous potential for resistance of existing systems of oppression, but one that is not living up to its potential. Rather, users are largely stuck working with our existing cultural vocabulary of bodies, which reifies bodily gender norms and beauty standards.

2. Creating and Living the Self in Second Life

The first step to participating in Second Life is to create an avatar. An avatar is a virtual representation of a user. People create a variety of different avatars, from ones almost identical to their actual-life selves, to the idealized vision of what one could look like, to the surreal (e.g., the Flying Spaghetti Monster). They may even create multiple, different avatars for different purposes. All visual aspects of an avatar are entirely customizable. Some elements are easier to edit than others, but a dedicated player can almost always create whatever she or he can imagine in terms of appearance. While, of course, these avatars are played by actual-life people, some users ascribe other personality traits to their avatars, ones that they themselves may or may not have, as if playing a character. The concept of the avatar is foreshadowed by Goffman: “Individuals often foster the impression that the routine they are presently performing is their only routine, or at least their most essential one. As previously suggested, the audience, in their turn, often assumes that the character projected before them is all there is to the individual who acts out the projection for them” (1959, 48). Users create avatars that may or may not reflect their actual-life bodies or personalities, but the presentation of these selves makes a claim to particular traits and identities. In *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body* (2006), Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini claim that the body is integral to creating selfhood: “There is no body without a

reflexive and agentic self and there is no self without a reflexive and agentic body.... the body [is] a source of signification and communication" (10-11, 2006). In this chapter, I will explore the differences (or lack thereof) between constructions of identity in Second Life and actual life through the body and physical appearance. While users' avatars' appearances often vary significantly from their actual life appearances, many users claim this is unimportant in identity construction; however, because identity is often read by others (at least partially) based on appearance, I believe that the constructed appearances of avatars are strategic moves to make particular identity claims by the user.

There has been much debate over how to categorize and describe Second Life. Some use the common acronym, MMORPG, or Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Game. Yet others object to this moniker, noting that Second Life is not a game, per se. While it has several elements in common with MMORPGs like World of Warcraft or Everquest, such as a rich graphical interface and the first-person shooter perspective, there are no points, no levels, and no winning. Instead, users are invited to explore whatever interests them, to act in whatever ways they please, for no other reward than their own enjoyment and expression. Those opposing the MMORPG category generally prefer the term MUVE (Multi-User Virtual Environment), or simply "virtual world". These names, suggest that Second Life is more a world in and of itself, like the actual physical world, instead of minimizing it as a "game". While all of the respondents I spoke with told me that Second Life was real to them, they had interacted with other users who thought of Second Life as a game. One respondent, Jenny, who is involved in a religious community in Second Life, told me, "We get a lot of people who are

surprised, dismayed, in fact, that there's a church in what they think of as a game. Like, y'know, you, you shouldn't play with things like church. God isn't a game. That's true, God isn't a game. This isn't a game church." Yet, as she said, she considered Second Life as real as any church. All of my respondents felt that Second Life was indeed "real". None of them considered it a game, and none of them relegated their activities there to the category of "play". As such, most of them took their avatars quite seriously.

One respondent suggested the concept of "mixed reality". He was primarily referring to events like conferences, where some participants might be physically present together, and others may participate in technologically-mediated ways, such as Second Life, Twitter, or video- or audio-conferencing. However, the term deserves further examination as a genealogy of reality, in which a variety of media and methods of being "present" can be combined to form a rich, complex reality that includes technological mediation and the virtual world without subordinating them to the physical world.

As noted earlier, Levy, like several authors, rejects the binary of "virtual" and "real"; instead, he places "virtual" in opposition to "actual", suggesting that both are subsets of the "real". This genealogy is similar to that of "mixed reality". I prefer these genealogies of reality, because they avoid the implicit assumption that somehow the virtual is less real for being technologically mediated. While I have some hesitations about the term "actual", since it seems to convey the idea that physical events are "more real" than virtual ones, I strongly prefer "actual" to the colloquial use of "real life" in opposition to virtual world, which many of my respondents used. Given that most authors who study virtuality use the terms "actual" and "virtual" to distinguish between

physical and technologically mediated entities and encounters, I will also be using these terms as subsets of a larger “mixed reality”. We do not suppose that phone conversations are not “real”, simply because I happen to be using the technology of my telephone. No more should we believe that interactions and individual selves within virtual worlds somehow do not "count" or are not real. The virtual self can be as telling about one’s identity as the actual self; with this in mind, I investigated the ways in which my respondents had created their virtual selves.

The Actual and the Virtual Self

I asked all of my respondents how their avatars were similar to or different from their actual selves. Some could immediately name their similarities and differences, and others were stymied by the question, because they considered themselves and their avatar(s) one and the same. All of my respondents were quite adamant that at least one of their avatars¹ was simply an extension of themselves in Second Life, but freely admitted that there were many qualities that they didn’t share with their avatars. Some designed avatars purposely different from their bodies, and others kept their bodies more similar. Yet, most interesting was the user’s own perception of similarity or difference; many reported to me that their avatar was similar, while describing or showing me an avatar that diverged wildly from the actual life person in front of me. There was often a conflict between how users actually appeared and how their avatars appeared, but participants seemed anxious to minimize these differences, either by declaring them unimportant, or denying their existence altogether.

A number of my respondents were adamant that their avatars were not separate from themselves. Sue claimed that her avatar was the same as she was. I asked her how she wanted her avatar to be perceived, and she answered, “As an extension of me...she’s not different than I am. So, how I want people to see me in real life.” Sue is speaking specifically of her avatar’s personality, minimizing the importance of her avatar’s body. She generalized this desire for similarity to others she knew in Second Life, as well:

I met those people at the conference. It was really cool to know and to see them, and to know exactly that that’s who they are as their avatar, too. That’s the interesting part. Martha is very.... Just as stoic in person, just as regal-looking as her avatar is. And, y’know, Windstorm Incendio, she has big bushy black hair, and she does in Second Life. So, it’s like that person you see there, it’s who you’re going to find standing in real life, too.

Here, Sue is referring to both personality traits and physical attributes. Sue tended to dismiss differences between users and avatars, and emphasize similarities. Whatever discrepancies might exist, Sue found the similarities more important, which seemed to express a desire for a certainty of self. Similarly, Don said that, “I’m the same both places.” Don expressed anger about users who have multiple avatars and play them within Second Life, particularly about an incident when a man with two avatars dated different women with each avatar. He said, “That really bothers me. Because you’re trying to trick people. I don’t think that’s what Second Life is there for.” Don not only didn’t see any separation between himself and his avatar, but expected the same of others, and disapproved of other ways of playing an avatar.

Holly directly critiqued the “real life”/Second Life split:

The avatars are simply expressions of myself, at least, that’s the way I look at it. I don’t treat them as characters that I’m writing scripts for. I

think people that would do that, and I know there are some, are missing out on the depth and the richness of what you can get out of Second Life. Yeah. I mean, in my real life, um, which bring up another issue – I don't think there's a real difference between the two. There's just a medium, if you will.... But a lot of people don't get that. It takes a little effort to explain it.

Here, Holly considers Second Life simply a medium for communication. Yet Marshall McLuhan suggests that “the medium is the message,” or that the media used for communication influences the content that it communicates. Often, virtual bodies and experiences are divergent from actual bodies and experiences. While users passionately argue that their feelings and personalities in virtual worlds are “real”, they are quick to dismiss bodies and appearances as pretty or expressive but ultimately unimportant.

One user, Mygdala March, found herself more and more dissatisfied with her avatar as she became more and more visibly pregnant in actual life. She resolved this issue by making her avatar pregnant, as well. For her, it was important that her avatar share her actual body shape during her pregnancy. Interestingly, she had previously insisted that Second Life was an appropriate place to experiment with bodies different from her actual body. But once pregnant, she wanted to have that particular bodily connection with her avatar, perhaps because pregnancy had become a crucial part of her identity.

One respondent, Lucas, told me, “I think certainly, there are probably more similarities than differences [between my avatar and my actual persona], and I think some people are really attached to similarities.” When initially planning his avatar, Lucas thought, “It would be better if I had something that resembled myself. So, that's the avatar I've stuck with.” He elaborated, “My avatar is, he's got red hair and a beard and a

mustache, just like me. I have a name so people might make the connection [between my avatar and my actual-life persona]. I mean, if you look at a picture of me and a picture of my avatar, side by side, you'd say, oh, yeah, of course, that's this guy's avatar." "[I wanted to be perceived as] a reasonable role model for how to, how to appear, how to look, how to behave, that sort of thing..." Not only was Lucas's avatar similar to his actual appearance, but he felt strongly about keeping it so. Lucas worked in technology in higher education, and uses his avatar in a variety of educational situations. Keeping his avatar's appearance fairly pedestrian and close to his actual appearance helped him to do his job. Lucas, however, seemed fully cognizant of the ways in which other users change their appearance through their avatars. He had simply chosen not to do so, for the most part. Lucas said that there are "different ways that people choose to represent themselves in-world, and... reasons behind them.... My choices have all been related to why I originally got into it, which is education. So I need to, I need to remain something, somebody who I think is accessible and kind of basic as far as look and feel for people." Lucas had purposely kept his avatar realistic and simplified to use in a professional context. His use of Second Life drove his self-presentation.

When I begin my interview, Lee told me immediately, "Well, the most obvious theme you're going to find is that we don't look like we do in-world." Lee said that she started out trying to reconstruct her actual-world body in Second Life:

I made my self my height, which is 5'3", and I made myself approximately my weight, which means I look like an apple dumpling, and I used system [default] hair and I had an Irish cap on my head, and a backpack that I had picked up from somewhere, and sandals...and that's the way I looked for about 7 months.

Then Lee ran into a snag with a particular outfit that she wanted:

It was a lavender plaid top that I wanted to wear with my jeans, cause I was getting tired of my t-shirt, and my rear end stuck out. So. I couldn't figure out how I could adjust the outfit, so I adjusted me. Shoes, my feet became tiny, my hips because non-existent. Belle's *very* slender.

She's slender and graceful. Still on the short side. Still with the freckles and the glasses. She tends to wear flowy-type outfits of whimsical jean-type outfits. She has a very good mermaid outfit, and that's a little bit more flirtatious.

Lee discovered that it was easier to change her avatar's body shape to fit clothing than it was to change clothing to fit her, something I had also been told early on in my Second Life experience. She went from an "apple dumpling" shape to being "very slender". In fact, most of my respondents told me that their avatars were significantly thinner than they were in actual life, in part to conform to their clothing sizes. Lee also suggested that her avatar's appearance affects her avatar's behavior in-world, noting that she is more flirtatious when she appears as a mermaid.

However, appearance affects perception, both the perception other users have of a user, and her or his own self-perception. I interviewed an older man named Don, who had an avatar significantly different from his actual appearance. When I asked him what kind of perception he thinks he gives off, he tells me that others find his avatar "pretty sexy. I'm obviously not like that, so. He's different in that way. He conveys probably a different message that way than I do in real life." While Don was clearly aware that his avatar's image and the perception his avatar gives was very different from that of his actual self, he still maintained that they are the same, because their personalities and interests were similar. He was genuinely surprised when those he met in Second Life

treated him according to how they see his avatar instead of the information he gave them about his actual life self (for instance, his actual age). “Somebody would just come up and say, god, you’re hot. Excuse me? Oh, you mean him [the avatar]. Ok! Um, and I just wasn’t used to that. Y’know, I’m fifty-eight, been married thirty-seven years, y’know, I’ve been, like, out of this game for a while.” Despite Don’s insistence that he and his avatar were the same, he knew that other people don’t see it that way. In fact, Don went to great lengths to describe how he and his avatar have a similar posture, but casually added that they look quite different:

I think we’re alike. We act the same. Interestingly enough, he has a pose he strikes, and I, it took me a little while to figure it out, but there was something familiar about the way he stood... And one day, at school, or somewhere, I was standing, and I caught a view of myself in the mirror, and I’m like, that’s it! We both fold our arms the same way and even put our feet in the same position.

Don told me this similarity is unintentional, and he seemed surprised to have discovered it. “But, I mean, as far as looks, I don’t think we look anything alike.... But, I know, we act the same way. We’re interested in the same things, obviously.” Here, Don seems to be searching for ways that he and his avatar are the same, despite their obvious differences. He sensed the contradiction here, and looked for ways to resolve it. He conceded that he and his avatar look nothing alike, but maintained that they are overall similar, because of personality and body movement.

Despite many users’ contentions that their life in Second Life was a real or important as their actual life, they were often quick to discount appearances when they differed from actual life appearances, which they often did. However, what I found most telling was this statement from Lee, discussing strategies for playing with appearance:

“You have a backup folder for the real you, so that you can change back very quickly.”

While this sort of play related to appearance was common and informal, many users had strong ties to what they perceived as the “real” virtual self, and were loathe to lose her or him while playing.

Identity isn't entirely based in the body or physical appearance. However, the essential identity claims we make are often conveyed visually, through dress, posture, even body shape. In Second Life, this often means through the body and appearance of the avatar. Because these elements are determined by the user, their meanings can be considered deliberately or subconsciously invoked, rather than caused by happenstance, inherited stature, or what happened to be clean to wear on a given day. Thus, the difference between the actual life body and the Second Life body can be read as a rejection of those elements in the actual life body that aren't present in Second Life. These differences are markers of meaning that combine to communicate identity in-world.

Physical Appearance

In addition to the body, there are other elements that comprise physical appearance, and they were often mentioned in my interviews. While I did explicitly ask users how they dressed in Second Life, I did not bring up hair. Yet I found it recurring in my interviews. Hair and clothing are both aspects of physical appearance that can be easily modified in actual life, as opposed to physical qualities like height or eye color. Yet many of my respondents used clothing and hairstyle in quite different ways in Second Life than they did in actual life.

Hair

To my surprise, hair came up frequently in my interviews. Several of my respondents seemed to use hair as a signifier of identity and as a connection with their actual selves. When insisting that wildly different-looking avatars were similar to them, various respondents told me that they and their avatars had the same color hair. They would tell me that their avatar was much like them, then describe an avatar that was very different in body shape, height, and style, and tack on, “We have the same color and style of hair.” The similarities between avatar hair and their own hair seemed to overcome all other forms of difference.

For those who did not have similar hair, they mainly told me about the shortcomings of their own actual-life hair. Several respondents gestured ruefully at their own thinning or short hair, and contrasted it with the “gobs of hair” that they had chosen to give their avatars. Hair was a key to how respondents wanted to represent themselves.

For instance, Don used his own hair as an example of the kind of youth embodied by his avatar: “I had, at one point, the one [image of my avatar] my wife saw the first night, not only did I have this earring, I had like hair down to like my butt. I mean, seriously, you can see that I don’t have a lot of hair here [gestures to his own thinning hair], so it was kind of like, like, so I got rid of that. So now the hair is a lot like what I have.” Don told me that his wife had been surprised by the way his avatar looked, asking him if that was what he wished he looked like. He claimed that it was not, but that it was necessary for the kind of music career he wanted to have in Second Life. Interestingly, the one night I saw Don’s avatar perform, after our initial interview, he had shoulder-

length brown hair in something of a grungy style – certainly nothing like his short thinning hair in actual life.

For many, hair acts as a marker of actual life physicality that seems to supercede other forms of physical difference. A similar hairstyle or color is indicative that the user's actual life and Second Life appearance are the same, no matter how different they may be in other aspects. For others who feel their own hair to be deficient in some way, Second Life becomes a chance to have the hair they cannot have in actual life. This case of the appearance one wishes one had will be revisited later in this chapter, in "Idealization".

Clothes

In conjunction with mutable bodies, Second Life is a site of expression and experimentation through clothing. While clothing isn't part of the body, of course, it's still heavily governed by body shape and size, and is part of one's appearance and self-presentation. Clothing, shoes, and other appearance-related items make up a significant part of the Second Life economy (although they are dwarfed by the real estate market).

Fewer users were interested in making their clothing style in Second Life match their actual world style than were concerned about making their bodies match. Lucas, who was most concerned with keeping his avatar similar to his actual self said, "I've changed like, hair, and facial features some, and clothes. That's about it." He said that he wore, "Hawaiian shirt[s] and stuff like that, y'know, when it's nice and sunny and warm. I think now I'm wearing jeans and just a regular t-shirt." Hawaiian shirts are generally not his normal office style of dress, but jeans and t-shirts are a regular look for

him outside of Second Life. Jenny told me about how her avatar dressed: “She wears a lot of, she wears a lot of the same kinds of clothes that I do wear. I made myself one outfit from scratch that I’m really kind of proud of, and it’s really very similar to what I wear in real life. It’s a print skirt and a solid top and a jacket, and she always wears long skirts, just like I do. She almost never wears slacks... she wears some things I would like to wear but I can’t, like going around in evening clothes and so on.” So Jenny wore a combination of clothes that she regularly wore outside of Second Life, along with other, more elaborate outfits that she didn’t often get to wear in actual life.

Sue told me that she dresses according to the function: riding gear for riding, pantsuits for professional work, etc. Even though the functional aspects of such clothes don’t apply, their cultural meanings still make them appropriate dress. Along these lines, Holly had been wearing a bikini, which she noted, “I keep thinking, it’s getting cold outside, I gotta wear something different with it. So I keep the pants and got the shirt know that goes with it, too.... Um, meeting-wise, I always look professional without, y’know, my belly button hanging out and, y’know I don’t, I always put undershirts on so if something’s too low-cut, it’s not overly, y’know, revealing, just to be professional. I mean, I don’t wear skirts that much, mainly jeans and slacks and stuff like that, for those kind of functions. And occasionally, I’ll just put on a dress [referring to a ballgown] cause I like it, and I’ll just go around in that.” Second Life allows for users to play with different styles. For instance, Mike’s two avatars experiment with some very specific styles: “One of them dresses like an eighteenth century highwayman, I think that’s the best description I can come up with... The other wears anything from... Japanese

formalwear to, like a thirties ball gown, to... I mean, all kinds of stuff.” Mike told me that the event he’s attending usually drives his clothing choice, but sometimes the personal relationships of the participants with whom he’s interacting influence his dress, as well.

When I was introduced to Second Life, a friend kindly showed me the ropes, and took me shopping for appropriate skin, hair, and clothing, to keep me from looking like a “newbie,” someone new and inexperienced in Second Life. When we visited a shoe store, she told me with great joy that shoes in Second Life were great, because you could wear all kinds of heels without your feet hurting. When I selected a pair of relatively sedate pumps, she warned me that I would need to set my feet to the smallest size possible, because shoes in Second Life generally weren’t designed for any other size. We also discussed that skirts were sometimes not intended for avatars with larger buttocks, and she told me it was easier to adjust the size of your rear than to adjust the size of the skirt. In both of these instances, it was suggested that I change my body to fit my clothes, rather than change my clothes to fit my body. Clothes aren’t governed by practical aspects like warmth or fit. They exist solely as cultural markers and expressions of self.

Disability in Second Life

I asked all of my respondents about what opportunities they had in Second Life that they did not have in actual life. I expected some to answer along gendered lines, but instead, a number referred to issues of disability. Jenny said that going to church in Second Life was more convenient than attending church in actual life, mostly because she preferred the later service, but also because her multiple sclerosis (MS) made it a hassle

to travel to an actual church. “Yeah, well, I haven’t been going to church for several years. I can claim that it’s MS, and that I’d have to roust my husband out of bed every Sunday to take me, and these are partially the reasons, but the main reason is, I don’t want to get up out of bed early enough to go to church. I’m a night person.” Still, MS was a factor for Jenny. Sue mentioned horseback riding as an activity she enjoyed in Second Life, but one that was no longer possible for her in actual life, due to a spinal injury. She said, “Some years ago, I actually ended up having a disc issue in my L5S1 [spine], and I’m sure that I will never ride a horse ever again in my entire life. In Second Life, I own three and go riding every Friday night, y’know?... We’re riding through a cruise ship, on a horse, with like 20 other people. Not something I’m ever gonna get to do in real life.” These users pursued a variety of activities in second Life that might be difficult or impossible for them otherwise.

Mike identified a common observance: that some users with autism spectrum disorders find interaction through Second Life easier than actual-life interaction. “What it’s really about is social involvement, particularly [for] people who are in situations where they don’t have access to a lot of social interaction... Folks who, disabled folks, folks who, some of the, two of the most successful, more interesting people I’ve met have Asperger’s. They can’t interact [well] in real life. But you get them in Second Life, where there’s a, um, a mediator, if you will...some kind of a step that they have to go through, and it takes away some of the fear that they face in real life, and in that way, it seems to help them.” Similarly, Suzanne told me about a user she knows with Asperger syndrome. She said that he’s “not very functional in this world, but has been able to be

so functional in-world, and was one of [Linden Lab's] first Residents... they ended up hiring him, basically, and now he's like a really valued member of the team, and he met a woman in-world... and they got married.... Through the interface, he was able to really find a way to interact that kind of went above his disability." For both physical and neurological disabilities, Second Life can allow people with disabilities to have experiences that they may not be able to have in actual life.

However, for many people with disabilities, their disability is part of their identity. Lucas told me about a friend of his who felt strongly about letting others know about his disability: "He wanted his avatar to have a wheelchair. He didn't want to be different." So Lucas sent his friend photos of avatars with wheelchairs, which his friend liked, because the wheelchair expressed a central aspect of himself. "He didn't want to look different [from his actual self]. Or be perceived different than he really is, in life, because he doesn't want to be treated differently.... Y'know, for him it's another extension of communicating, just as it is for all of us. But he also wanted other people to know where he was coming from. With that visual cuing that it gave." Lucas's friend's disability was an important part of his identity that he wanted to communicate with others when he presented himself in Second Life.

Second Life can create opportunities for people with disabilities to have experiences that might otherwise be difficult or impossible, but it also can erase disabilities and users' identities as persons with disabilities. In order to properly convey their identities, users like Lucas's friend must find ways to embody their

disabilities even within Second Life. For them, changing their bodies means losing an important part their sense of self.

Idealization

When Lee went to a Second Life convention, she noticed how different the users looked in actual life than they did in-world:

Karen: What did you notice as the biggest difference between what they look like in-world and what they look like out-of world? What popped out at you?

Lee: I would have to say the idealization. All young and all beautiful. Um, flowing tresses and tripping around in five inch heels and dancing all night. Wearing outfits that I can't imagine you would ever wear in real life. Um, although the Stoker's ball was a real eye-opener. Stoker's Ball was leather and lace, and it was a, exactly what I said, just like it would be in-world. Some of those girls *really* went way out. Y'know, thigh-high latex boots, y'know.

The particular idealizations that Lee noticed are those that conform to traditional social norms of youth and beauty. While the users performed an overt sexuality that was similar to that which they might perform in-world, the other embodied elements of identity, such as youth and conventional beauty, could not be maintained outside of Second Life, and so Lee noticed how different everyone is from their avatar, even if they had maintained similar styles of dress or personality.

The creation of an avatar is much like what Joan Jacobs Brumberg describes as a "body project" in her book, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1997), in that the body is seen as something to be created and controlled. Brumberg says that, at this point in history, "the body is regarded as something to be managed and maintained" (xxi, 1997). Second Life bodies are mutable, controllable, easily changed again and again. Sue described the kind of detail she went into creating her body in

Second Life to make it look like her actual body, and then that she chose to purchase a pre-made appearance.

I got to pick and choose, short hair, long hair, of course. I got that basic avatar and then proceeded to take, like, hours to tweak how I wanted her nose to look and how, hours, then finally I just went and bought the skin. Like, I, honestly, like I thought I looked, or like I thought I'd like to look, so initially, like I said, hours tweaking individual things, making sure the eye color is perfect, hair, chin, and then went out and bought a skin.

Because the avatar is so customizable, beauty ideals seem suddenly more attainable. I myself had initially intended to commit to have a body in Second Life like my actual body – fat, short, with green eyes and brown hair. But even in my initial forays into Second Life, I felt uncomfortable. Did I have to be *so* fat and *so* short? Wouldn't red hair be fun, and much easier than a dye job in actual life? I created an avatar that was curvy, but not *too* fat by my standards, short in comparison to other avatars, but still measuring 5'6" in comparison with the landscape (I'm 5'0" in actual life). After several of these interviews, and spending much more time in Second Life, I still felt that my avatar couldn't compare to the fantastic beauty that surrounded me in-world, and made her thinner still and more petite-feeling and small-boned in general, although not actually any shorter. The attention paid to appearance belies the minimization of the virtual body that was discussed previously; if the virtual body is so irrelevant to the Second Life self, why do respondents (and I) spend so much time working on it, considering it, perfecting it?

Users create avatars that they feel are representative of themselves, but those representations don't always extend to the actual-world reality of their bodies. There's an aspect of culture-wide body dysphoria acted out in avatar creation: users feel they are

best represented by bodies that are actually quite unlike themselves. Yet according to Waskul and Vannini, the body is a source of communication. The body is a form of identity presentation, in addition to being a biological entity. By creating avatars so different from their own bodies, what are users saying about the meanings of their actual-life bodies? These meanings don't seem to work for them, so they invoke other bodies to convey different meanings that they feel are more representative of themselves. Their lived experiences as embodied individuals have driven them to seek out other kinds of bodies. This leads to the seemingly contradictory behavior of denying any importance of the virtual body, while simultaneously spending hours building and perfecting it.

When creating his avatar, Lucas was not simply looking for a particular appearance, but for a particular feeling:

Lucas: You had all of these different types of complexions and facial features, and, uh, so I, I went through the whole list and I came up with something that was similar to myself, and I've changed my outfits a few times.

Karen: Was that just practice, or were you changing things until it felt right, or...

Lucas: A mix. A mix of both those things, yeah.

To Lucas, there was an avatar appearance that "felt right", that he somehow identified with. Jenny, who had long, straight, dark and graying hair in actual life, was quite adamant about having red hair in-world: "It really looks kind of like mine most of the time except for being red. That's, red is what I would have wanted for mine to be."

Mike used two different avatars to express different facets of himself: "They are, I think I would describe them as two, as expressing different facets of me. One male, one female." Later he added that, as far as his personality went, "that part of me just comes

through,” and was not changed by the appearance or presentation of his avatars. “I’m not dumbing it down, deliberately or otherwise. I’m not quite valley girl, unquote. It’s not me so I don’t do it.” In Mike’s perception, some essence of himself was communicated, even though his avatars’ bodies communicated something quite different from his actual body.

I do not mean to criticize these contradictions, nor to suggest that either the virtual or actual body should be read as the authentic self or the whole of a person. I count myself a member of the political movements Cressida Heyes describes when she writes, “There are, of course, contemporary political movements that aim to debunk the connection between bodies and moral character: feminists, anti-racists, and disability rights activists, for example, have all convincingly argued that bodies marked by sex, race, or physical impairment do not indicate an inferior intellectual ability or moral character” (2007, 5). Yet appearances influence the perception of and thus interaction with others, and in doing so, influence our own experiences and behaviors. It seems disingenuous at best to claim that an avatar with my own personality, but with a much more conventionally attractive body than I have in actual life, will experience the world in the same way I do. By minimizing the importance of appearance and the body, the effects thereof become invisible and naturalized. In an era of increased surveillance and scrutiny of the body, “how we look has become more, not less, important to how we understand ourselves” (Heyes 2007, 6). As such, the body, especially a body as malleable as the virtual body, becomes a symbol of the self; it is a way that others can read the self, or at least the elements of the self that one has chose to share visually and

corporeally. I suggest that virtual worlds can be seen as a semiotization of the actual. Avatars become, not bodies themselves, but symbols of bodies we feel are representative of ourselves. Suely Fragoso and Nisia Martinsdo Rosario describe this process in their article, “Just Like Me Only Better”:

The process of role construction established here is one that requires the use of a sign dimension – despite this not being mentioned by Goffman – that is capable of organizing these representations into a complex discourse in which the belief in the representation predominates. In this same way, the avatar is also a set of signs through which the subject seeks to construct a believable representation (2008, 315).

Levy also suggests this, considering virtual worlds descriptive tools that “enable us to communicate through a universe of shared signs” (2001, 53). It is because certain body types and shapes function as cultural symbols that they create a shared vocabulary with which to describe the selves of their inhabitants. Hayles describes this, as well, differentiating between, “the enacted body, present in the flesh on one side of the computer screen, and the represented body, produced through the verbal and semiotic markers constituting it in an electronic environment” (1999, xiii). Given that the visual of the virtual body is usually the first mode of communication in Second Life, it is no surprise that bodies in Second Life are used to speak in this language of bodily symbols.

Balsamo writes,

When the body is said to be “inscribed,” “painted,” or “written,” it makes sense to write of the “discourse of the body,” meaning the patterned ways that the body is represented according to broader cultural determinations and also the way that the body becomes a bearer of signs and cultural meaning (1996, 19).

The “signs and cultural meaning” that are born on the body are the result of this semiotization, and they themselves result in this discourse. This is an explanation for the

contradiction of the value of the body in the narratives of my respondents. The virtual body itself is easy to dismiss as merely pixels on a screen, driven by a far more important material body and personality. But the cultural meanings that the virtual body symbolizes are significant. The ways in which users choose to symbolize themselves reveal much about our perceptions of bodies, gender, and identity, and the virtual body qua symbol makes claims to particular identities. As such, respondents tell me over and over that their avatars are their “real” selves and are deeply attached to their virtual bodies, while simultaneously ignoring or minimizing enormous differences between their actual and virtual bodies. One major identity claim these virtual bodies make is a claim to a particular set of gender meanings through the invocation of particular gendered signs. In the next chapter, I will investigate the ways that these virtual bodies disrupt and reinscribe traditional understandings of gendered bodies by symbolizing particular aspects of gender.

¹ Most users had between 2 and 5 avatars. One user claimed to have lost track of how many avatars she had. Usually, one avatar was considered the “primary” one, and others had specific purposes, like being part of a cat-based subculture, or going to a vampire-themed party. Some had one avatar for their professional lives, and another for personal use.

3. Gender and the Body in Second Life

The most simplistic definitions of gender tell us that gender is the social and cultural meanings associated with biological sex. But Judith Butler contests this, suggesting that biological sex is culturally defined, as well, by the gender categories that are socially and culturally recognized as valid. Anne Fausto-Sterling tracks the various ways in which sex and sexuality have been defined and redefined, and the ways that aberrations have been pathologized throughout history. Clearly, there's little that stable about any of these categories. We may think of gender as being predicated on one's body, but in truth, the ways that one's body is understood and categorized is shaped through the culturally available gender meanings at any given historical and cultural location. In *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* (2006), Judith Lorber and Lisa Jean Moore write,

The embodiment, or the physical manifestation and enactment of cultural and social norms, especially those that make bodies and body practices feminine and masculine, is a global phenomenon. A French anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu, viewed the body as a site where culture, social power, and social structure are produced and manifested (2006, 62).

Thus, the body can be read as an indicator of cultural meanings of sex and gender. Given the inherent instability in all of these categories, the ways in which both gender and sex are expressed in Second Life is heavily culturally determined, and the shape this expression takes can tell us much about our current popular understandings of gender and

sex. It is incorrect to speak of Second Life culture as monolithic, since Second Life users hail from all over the globe, and are diverse in age, ethnicity, race, gender, and a variety of other characteristics. However, the users I interviewed are all from the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, in a year-long time period; thus, the data collected can be revealing about gender norms in this particular cultural location. Second Life claims to allow the freedom for users to create anything they can imagine. But virtual bodies aren't merely created; they are created within a cultural context, both conscious and subconscious, that values certain expressions of gender above others. These valued expressions are the ones most often reproduced within Second Life. While gendered behavior norms may be less strictly enforced in Second Life, norms of body and appearance are reified. Second Life allows for an unprecedented flexibility in gender expression and sex categories, but this flexibility is largely ignored by users in favor of more familiar forms of gender expression through appearance and the body.

Gender(ed) Expression: Behavior and the Body

Within Second Life, gender is expressed in a variety of ways, including through behavior and through the body. As discussed in the introduction, Balsamo tells us that the body, "as a process, is a way of knowing and marking the world, as well as a way of knowing and marking a 'self'" (1996, 3). As such, I want to investigate the ways in which Second Life bodies are used to express a gendered identity. While I intend to focus primarily on the gendered virtual body, enough respondents remarked on their own and other's gendered behaviors that I feel a discussion of the subject is relevant. Behavior is enacted through the virtual body, which is inherently gendered, and thus is

also part of a process of gendered self-making. Participants usually noticed gender when it deviated from their understanding of normative gendered behavior. What exactly constituted normative gendered behavior depended very much on the respondent in question, particularly the respondent's age, geographic location, and life experiences that have influenced their understandings of gender.

Don was most expressive on the subject. Don is an older man who lived in a rural area. While he seemed open to considering new viewpoints on various subjects, he also seemed to have been largely exposed to more traditional gender norms. Coming into contact with those in Second Life who might be younger, or involved in various sexual subcultures, or simply different in their views on gender and relationships, was often a surprise for him. He told me that he found the women in Second Life "very bold." He described a particular incident when he was performing as a vocalist, and the venue owner and his audience were interacting with him.

Everybody was having a good time. So somebody, the venue owner was like, I Med me and said, see, you do have groupies. And I'm like, I I Med back and said, yeah, too bad they're all, they were all lesbians. Not that I have anything against them, but I'm like, just my misfortune, whatever. And, and I said, to make it even funnier, um, it was either two or three of them I Med me and said something like they, they would vow to go straight if I get my avatar to go away with them for a week, and a couple of others, like, y'know, like proposed three-ways, y'know! And I'm like, whoa, whoa, whoa, I'm not, I'm not used to this.... You have to shake your head and laugh. It's like, would you ever say that in real life? I doubt it. Probably not. I don't know, maybe they would.

Don was surprised by a variety of elements in this encounter. He seemed surprised by the sexual talk that women engaged in, both in public, and in the privacy of IMs. He also seemed surprised by the proposed sexual behavior of a virtual three-way. Lastly, the

lesbians who offered to “go straight” for him displayed a flexible sexuality that he found baffling. As such, he doubted that this behavior would translate to actual life. Second Life certainly offers an opportunity to be uninhibited, sexual, or experiment with identity in a variety of ways, not just gender, without some of the potential consequences of actual life. But Don also told me that, “[Women in Second Life] are definitely a different group than the ladies that I know in real life.” Don saw a disconnect between his actual-world understanding of women, and the women he encounters in Second Life. Second Life introduces him to new ways of being feminine.

Don also found his own traditionally gendered behavior denormalized by Second Life culture when he behaved in a “gentlemanly” fashion.

I guess there’s not too many nice guys in there, from what I understand. I guess a lot of them are real jerks, and I’m not. I’m like, polite, um, I’m concerned if you feelings get hurt. I don’t want to hurt anybody’s feelings. If I owe you something I’m going to pay it, or give it back to you, or at least explain what happened. If I’m not going to be able to make a concert, I at least notify the venue manager... A lot of people don’t. And it’s a lot of the guys are like, they’re just real jerks. I don’t understand that.

While it’s widely accepted that the anonymity of the Internet creates opportunities for uncivil or harassing speech and behavior without serious consequences, Don considered this a gendered attribute – men online are inconsiderate jerks, or so he has been told by others who want him to understand how nice he is in comparison. His own apparent courtesy and consideration expressed a different kind of masculinity that he perceived as being less common in Second Life. Don found that he wanted to tell other men, “Cavemen don’t exist anymore. You don’t hit ‘em over the head with a club and drag them into the cave. I don’t know where you thought you could get away with that. Is

that something that you do in real life, y'know? Just the way they treat women, y'know, sometimes the way they treat other people. It's like, is that how you are? Is that how you treat other people in real life?" Don sees himself as an old-fashioned gentleman, and is amazed at the less-gallant forms of masculinity he finds in Second Life. He takes our interview as an opportunity to affirm the kind of masculinity that he tries to express, and to juxtapose it with other kinds of masculinity.

Lee used her alternate avatars (alts) to explore different facets of herself. Each of them had a different personality, and behaved differently. "Each [of the alts] show a facet. [Lissa] is a lot softer. She's got a wicked sense of humor, but [her partner] Waterhawk knows all he has to do is literally snap his fingers and she's quiet and she kneels at his feet, all of that. Belle would be like, 'You know what you can do with those fingers, don't you?'" Here, Lee is not just describing the difference between two avatars, but the ways in which Lissa and Belle's differences are based on their levels of obedience. Lissa was a slave in a sadomasochism (S&M) subculture, and so she showed obedience and deference to her master, Waterhawk. Belle was not involved in this subculture, and so she was not as compliant or deferential as Lissa. Lee suggested that both of these attitudes are part of her own personality, but they also constituted different expressions of femininity. Belle was witty and independent, defining herself by her lack of reliance on men; Lissa was just the opposite, compliant and soft-spoken, existing almost exclusively for her romantic partner. Their behavior, particularly towards men, was revealing about the gender roles they performed, but not strictly limited to a particular set of behaviors.

Mike found that his avatar's gender drastically changed the way that others treated him. He used both a male and female avatar at different times, and was interested in exploring the differences between how they were perceived.

Mike: The female avatar, I built, quite frankly, because I wanted to explore some things. One of which was, I'd read and heard of over and over and over again was that women were more social than guys. I wanted to find out if that was true... Base on my own experience, it's true.
Karen: Did you find more, like strangers talking to you, or different kinds of interactions, or...?

Mike: Yes. To make the simple answer. I find that people just walk up and talk to me, particularly when I was hanging around the welcome centers. I get hit on a lot by guys. But the gals were more willing to have conversations. And as it fell out of the course of two years, the people I've talked to with my female avatar have become friends. That's not the case with the male avatar.

When Mike initially told me about his two avatars, he described it this way: "They are, I think I would describe them as two, as expressing different facets of me. One male, one female." Like Lee, Mike felt that his different avatars expressed different parts of himself. However, here, those parts were associated with different genders. Later, Mike said, "There's the, the male and female, I don't know which one's the alt of which, I've forgotten." Mike didn't claim one of these avatars to be his "real" self or a primary avatar and the other less important or secondary, but rather allowed that both of the avatars are expressing part of his identity. The differences Mike noticed may have less to do with Mike's behavior than with the behavior of others, based on their perception of Mike's avatar as male or female.

Mike told me a little about the physical appearances of his male and female avatars. "One male, one female, um, they're both taller than I am.... the male has a beard, but his hair's longer [than mine]. Um, more grey.... I've already told you the

female is taller than I am, um, longer hair, also, dark plus grey or white or however you want to describe it. Slender, y'know, built like sort of a long-distance runner or somebody like that.” Neither of these alts was particularly reminiscent of Mike’s actual world appearance, but they seemed at least somewhat similar to each other, although distinctly and differently gendered. The male avatar had facial hair, marking his appearance as masculine. The female avatar wore gendered clothing styles, such as “Japanese formalwear [or] a thirties ballgown.” The bodies and appearances of these two avatars were instrumental in expressing the differently gendered facets of Mike that he wanted to express.

When I asked Don about how he dressed, his response revealed that his outfits were explicitly gendered. “If I’m in a concert [my dress is] formal, cause most of the places I sing at is formal attire, so I have some tuxes, uh, right now I have something called an Alpha Male casual tux... That actually looks pretty cool. The shirt is open to here, um, it’s got a, the big collar, it’s got the rolled up sleeves if I’m not wearing the coat, and it’s got a jacket.” Most noticeably, the tuxedo Don wore was titled the “Alpha Male casual tux,” suggesting the kind of masculinity one is meant to perform when wearing the outfit.

This sampling of anecdotes from interviews paints a picture of the role that gender plays in Second Life, both through gendered behavior and through embodiment. Although Second Life purports to be a way to break free of the strictures of reality, gender follows users into the virtual world and colors the self-making process there. This is part of the idealization process that is discussed in chapter two. Not only are avatars,

on the whole, young and beautiful, they are also have very strictly and traditionally gendered bodies. While gendered behavior is sometimes flexible, gendered bodies seem inescapable. In the next section, where I bring up the issue of changing the gender of virtual bodies, my respondents react with either disinterest or anxiety. The topic of virtual gender is one that is fraught with actual-world baggage.

Reluctance to Discuss Gender Play

When explaining this project to friends and family, one of the first questions often asked is, “Oh, so you’re studying people who are men and play women, or vice versa?” This issue is also frequently addressed in popular media about Second Life. There is a strong public interest in the phenomena of individuals performing “opposite” genders in virtual spaces. I asked each of my respondents if they engaged in gender-switching in-world. If they were women, did they ever play men? If they were men, did they ever play women? Most were incredibly reticent to discuss the subject, or possibly just uninterested. My questions were generally answered with a short, direct, “No,” and even after I prompted and asked why or why not, no elaboration was forthcoming.

Respondents couldn’t name why they weren’t interested in this much-hyped practice, and didn’t seem to want to think about it too long. The very idea of gender switching seemed to disrupt respondents sense of self. Over and over, I received responses like the following: “It doesn’t interest me at all.... It just doesn’t. Not my, not my thing. I don’t pretend not to be me.” “I don’t know. I’m just not into that. I have enough trouble with the one I have, being a man.... In fact, I was thinking about, I think, I was, as I was driving down here, I wonder if she’s gonna ask me that question. I’m thinking, well, how

would I feel about that? I'm like, ehhhh." "I'm not, it's not my thing... Never had the need to explore that." In this discussion, I'll use the term "gender play," to refer to changing gender and gender attributes of avatars, because it allows for the possibility of non-binary gender modifications, even though many of the respondents worked within a binary gender framework.

Several users referred to such gender play as deception, and thus something in which they, as presumably honest people, didn't care to participate. Don tells me, "I just don't think it's in what I'm doing [pause] it's too deceiving, and that would bother me. I'm not that, it's not the way I am." Later, he added,

Don: I could pull off a female song and people could think I'm a woman singing.

Karen: But that's just not something you feel...

Don: No [emphatically]. I just, that's deceiving people. I don't, I just don't want to do that.

Don obviously saw a female avatar as a deception, and not representative of himself.

Yet, when asked if his avatar is like him, he immediately said that he is, despite the fact that they have wildly different physical appearances. So, the body of his avatar wasn't important to Don in maintaining his identity, but the gender was. The differences between his avatar body and his actual body are not worth noting, but crossing gender lines seems somewhat taboo to him.

One of the aspects of gender play that is troubling to respondents was the gender play of other users. Don was concerned about meeting someone in Second Life who was playing another gender:

Sometimes I gotta be careful because, like men become women and women become men in there. And this one place where I used to sing at,

it was, what I thought was a host there, and we got to know each other pretty well, and, it got to the point, you know, you're kind of kidding around, and it was kind of almost like flirting, I'm like, "This is weird. He's a man." So then about a week later, he said, "By the way, I need to tell you something. I'm really a woman in real life." I'm like, "What a relief!" He said, "Why?" or she said "Why?" I said, "Because I was like flirting with you, if you didn't realize that," and she's like, "Well, yeah, that's why I decided maybe I should say something." I said, "Well, I was starting to, like really be concerned about myself, cause I was being attracted to this man." So it's stuff like that, you just don't know.

Don was clearly concerned about his own sexuality when he finds himself attracted to a male avatar in-world, but was reassured when he discovered that the user playing said avatar is female outside of Second Life. The uncertainty threatened the means to preserve his heterosexual self. In these circumstances, he concluded that he's "really" attracted to the woman behind the avatar, and thus secure in his heterosexuality. For Don, in this instance, gender goes beyond the virtual body – the gender that was most important to him was the gender of the user.

Jenny was among the least reluctant to discuss gender play, despite the fact that she and her avatar were the same gender.

Karen: What made you choose an avatar of the same gender as you?

Jenny: It wouldn't occur to me not to. I know one person who's male in real life and female in Second Life, but other than that, people tend to stick, it seems to me, to their gender. I know [people whose avatars are animals], but their names are masculine, and it's apparent talking to them that they're male... I like being female. I'd much rather be female than male.

While Jenny herself didn't participate in any gender play, she seemed unconcerned about the possibility, possibly because she was confident in her own ability to differentiate between those who are "actually" female or male, and those who are "playing" a particular gender.

But even Mike, who spoke openly, if somewhat shyly, about his female avatar and the increased sociality he experienced when playing her, couldn't initially pin down his reasons for trying to build a female avatar. He described looking through the possible standardized newbie avatars available when he began to be involved in Second Life: "And that's when the thought came to my mind, y'know, maybe I'll try a female avatar... I don't know why. I've never thought about why." Later, however, he explained that he had been lonely, and had trouble with social interaction and making friends in actual life. Because he had heard that women were more social than men, he created a female avatar in hopes of being part of that sociality. He wanted to experience interactions as a woman. He said, "There's a feeling of anonymity and safety that allows exploration of personality facets that would be, um, too scary to try out in real life.... So, I've explored some things that... I felt safer exploring that way." Mike used pre-transition transsexuals in intolerant communities as an example of the kind of personality facets that might be explored through appearance in Second Life, but seemed enormously reluctant to elaborate on what parts of himself he was expressing in-world that he didn't feel safe bringing to the actual world.

Holly was one of the few respondents who was matter-of-fact about her other-gender alts. "I don't remember how many different accounts that I have, but there's several. Some I'm a woman, in some I'm a guy. And in some I'm, non, y'know, a non-gender type creature, whatever, and I just do those things for fun. Um, and to learn about different things and to interact in different environments." Holly told me about a new wolf avatar she recently got, and remarked, "feels weird being a wolf." She also

mentions an avatar that is a pirate, which she specifically made male. “There only were other guys there, so to fit in more, that’s why I made the male character... There would have been a character place for a woman, y’know, in that area, but I felt like a guy would be more, y’know, appropriate or whatever. So that’s kind of why I made that one up.” Her primary avatar, Thea, she said, “is mainly like my teaching character.” She said that playing a male avatar is a different sort of experience: “I have to like almost think differently than I normally do. Um, where I have to, like, be more in character and be more creative in what I say and how I say it, and also to not sound like my regular self. Y’know, it’s interesting playing a guy.” Holly didn’t seem very emotionally invested in her male avatars, which may have been why she was so willing to talk about them. Her descriptions made the performance of gender evident, particularly the unfamiliar (to her) performance of masculinity, which required her to concentrate in order to maintain her gender performance. She made a point of describing the difference between her female and male avatars. I asked if people reacted differently to Holly’s different avatars, and she said that they did. “Even one time, I was wearing this real pretty skirt, like a flexi skirt, and like a top of whatever, and somebody says to me, ‘Why’re you all dressed up?’ And I’m like, I don’t know, I just like this dress.” Her femininity was questioned, but Holly has no similar story of her masculinity being up for debate. Despite, or perhaps because of all of Holly’s differently-gendered avatars, she maintained that,

Thea is me. Even though she looks different. But she’s the same in personality as me. Other people I’ve talked to consider their avatar that they, that they use, as a different entity than themselves, and so to me, that, that was kind of confusing, because I thought, y’know, when I was talking to so-and-so, I was really talking to the real person, but then one day they wrote back to me and said no, you’re talking to my avatar.

You're not talking to me.... But, for me, generally my Thea character is, doesn't really play the roles, is really my straight forward self, um, doesn't really, I mean, I mean, make up stories, and y'know, up, y'know, I'll make up some things, but I don't really lie, necessarily in the Thea character, um. And it's really, it's like, is it really lying, or is it playing a character?

So, for Holly, the gender of her avatars was determined by their function. For her primary avatar, Thea, she chose a moderately feminine avatar she felt reflects her actual life gender expression. But for her pirate avatar, which would be played largely in a homosocial environment of men, Holly chose a male avatar, to better fit in and conform with the expectations of being a pirate.

Lucas shared his observations on a professor friend's college class, which required undergraduate students to participate in Second Life as part of their class work:

A couple of her classes have been principally women, and then when they have to, when she kind of switches stuff out without telling the students, after they've become very attached to the look and feel of, y'know, of their female avatars, and then she's like, ok, everything's going to change, y'know. She said it's like mind-blowing. Women get different types of social pressures, they get different types of interactions with the other avatars, I mean, I think, I think it's a fascinating study, because, we should, we should be in somebody else's skin for a little bit.... It does open you up to some different perspectives about behavior, and just differences in perception and who you are, and who's behind that avatar, y'know?

In this situation, when users with female bodies in actual life are forced into changing their virtual appearance, or even their avatar's genders, they experience some of what it's like to live in another kind of body, of how others react to particular bodies, and how such bodies might navigate the world. But more, they are forced to notice and acknowledge the connection between their identity and their avatar's appearance, by way of noting its absence when the virtual body changes.

Sexuality and Relationships

The state of relationships and sexuality in Second Life is clearly considered salacious by the mainstream news stories that breathlessly report a world of orgies and virtual affairs. Indeed, some of this horror over Second Life romance seems to have spread beyond the media; Jenny told me that since her brother and sister-in-law became interested in Second Life and later divorced, her husband is convinced that Second Life is a hobby for people who want to get a divorce. Unsurprisingly, he took a dark outlook on Jenny's involvement, despite the fact that she almost exclusively attended Christian church in-world, and wanted her husband to join her in her virtual world activities.

As human beings, we are social and sexual creatures. In this context, the presence of both of these elements in Second Life becomes unsurprising. Second Life's official tagline is "Your World. Your Imagination". As such, it's predictable that such a world would contain sex and relationships, romantic or otherwise. But the shape of romance and sexuality in Second Life reveals cultural understandings of marriage and partnership, fidelity and sexuality, norms that are predicated on certain understandings of gender.

In Second Life, avatars that are in committed relationships are considered "partnered". This both avoids the loaded term, "married," which has legal implications that do not apply within the virtual world, and is a nod to the various genders and sexualities that find themselves in relationships in Second Life. A number of respondents told me stories about current or past partnerships in Second Life. Lee told me,

My [actual life] friends are a little bit, "Why aren't you out dating?"... But I haven't really had, haven't really had any desire to go out. I have my partner in Second Life. The emotions that you feel online are very very

real. People tend to forget that, and they wander into sometimes deep water.

Lee feels emotionally fulfilled by her Second Life relationships, and therefore doesn't feel the need to seek out physical co-presence through actual-world relationships. She spoke at length about her various relationships in Second Life, how they had begun and ended, and about her current partner, who had courted or was courting all four of her avatars in avatars of his own that matched the appearance and personality of each of Lee's avatars. In contrast, Don seemed to consider his partnership almost casual. When I guardedly mentioned his actual-life wife, he quickly told me that, of course, his relationship in Second Life was confined to his virtual life, and that he never planned to meet his Second Life partner. Don was similarly unconcerned with sex in Second Life, saying that he didn't think he would get much out of it, since it was just "pixel sex". So users varied in how seriously they felt they should take Second Life relationships. For some, they were just as meaningful as actual-world relationships. For others, they were dismissed as being "not real". While these two instances can't be generalized as an instance of a larger trend, it's interesting to note that Lee, as a woman, was far more emotionally and sexually invested in her virtual relationship than Don was. Don didn't feel that his relationship could be considered valid without face-to-face interaction. Lee was content with the emotional relationship and virtual sex she found in Second Life. Don required a level of physical co-presence. This could be a result of how women are taught to value emotional intimacy, and men are expected to require a higher level of sexual interaction, or simply a means for Don to resolve his participation in both a Second Life partnership and an actual-world marriage. Either way, both Lee and Don

invoked different sets of rules on how one is supposed to feel and behave in a romantic relationship.

Fidelity

Fidelity is by far the most frequently-addressed issue around online relationships in the media. If one is in an actual-world relationship, are online relationships cheating? What about cybersex or phone calls? Where do people in general, and Second Life users in particular, draw the lines in relationships to define fidelity from infidelity? How is fidelity related to whether relationships are regarded as “real”? I encountered participants using three methods for managing Second Life and actual-world relationships. The first involved having relationships solely in Second Life. However, this was still not an antidote to actual-world relationships issues. Lee explored some of the complications of a Second Life relationship with men who are partnered outside of Second Life:

My first relationship ended very very badly. Um, there’s a lot of married men in Second Life, a *lot* of married men. A lot of married women, too. And his wife was just livid when she found out he had a partner in Second Life. Considered it infidelity. And, y’know what, since then, people have asked me, how do you deal with married men, and I say, y’know, I look at these men, and I think on of two things. I think, if it was my husband, you’re right, I would be really upset. Or, and, what I would do is I could be right there in-world with him, *or*, I wouldn’t care. Um, either reaction is just as valid. Now, [he] lied very much to his wife. Oddly enough, what upset her was not the fact that we had a house together, with a sex gen bed... What really upset her was... it was very domestic like, exactly the way we would have been if we had been in a real life thing, and she freaked out... The intimacy.

Here, Lee explained that, to her, sharing intimacy and domesticity with someone were activities that hold great meaning within romantic relationships; this also seemed to be true of her first partner’s actual-world wife. Lee suggested that the best way to ensure

fidelity from a partner is to be involved in the arenas in which she or he may be cheating. If a partner is not “right there with him [or her],” then Lee felt that they have forfeited the right to care about what some might term infidelity in Second Life. Lee felt strongly that Second Life relationships are “real” and an important part of Second Life. She was emphatic that they are deeply meaningful and emotional; undervaluing them is a mistake that others make, including some of her previous partners, but she knew better. It is their emotional intimacy that makes them “real”, as contemporary women are frequently taught to believe: relationships require emotional intimacy more than physical interaction or a particular economic arrangement.

In contrast, Don had relationships both in Second Life and in the actual world. He explained his Second Life relationships to me almost glibly. He has had partners in Second Life, but although he felt that his avatar is his “real” self, these relationships are minimized as “not real”. Don claimed that he’s the same person in Second Life as he is in actual life, but if so, then he’s already married (to his actual-world wife). If his Second Life relationships were “real,” too, then he was practicing adultery or polyamory. However, since he didn’t see these relationships as “real,” then he felt free to pursue them without consequence or moral dilemma. Don clearly came across as valuing honesty and integrity, often citing particular practices (such as playing a female avatar when one’s actual gender is masculine) as deception, and subsequently condemning them as a result. He didn’t seem to feel any contradiction between these attitudes and his relationship situation.

Don said he didn't want to be seen as sexual in-world, and seemed perplexed that people persist in seeing him as sexual anyway. He tried to dissuade would-be romances, by telling women he is not interested, or by announcing his actual age. This seemed to have little effect. Women and men alike frequently expressed surprise that Don wasn't especially interested in sex in Second Life, expecting that, as a man, Don would naturally be interested in sex in all its forms, even virtually. In one encounter, Don was offered a threesome, and turned down the offer, "And [a friend] was like, she was, you're unusual. I'm like, what do you mean? Well, how's [your partner] every going to find out if you fool around like that? I'm like, are you kidding me? And apparently, that's what everybody does. And, I guess the two ladies were, like, shocked, because I said no. And I teleported out." Don considered having sex in-world with two women to be cheating on his Second Life partner, despite the fact he seemed to find his Second Life partner no moral threat to his actual-world marriage, or vice-versa. For Don, his relationships were strictly relegated to their respective spheres of the actual and the virtual, and functioned under their own set of rules in each realm.

In a third example of managing Second Life and actual life relationships, Holly balanced the two by getting her husband into Second Life. Although they often had different interests in-world, Holly felt that she was sharing an interest or hobby with him by simply both being in Second Life.

We do sort of separate things. But he comes to some meetings, um, that I ask him to come to, cause he's interested in coming, and so we would go to discussions.... But he's not into it as much as I am, he's, he's still, he's flexible enough to do stuff and, and I log in as him and go shop, because he doesn't, he doesn't feel like going to shopping places, but I, I got you a polo shirt today, y'know, whatever.

Holly also said that she kept her husband listed as her partner, “to kind of like keep the weirdos away or whatever.” Here, Holly displayed a concern about harassment if she were listed as unpartnered, or essentially single. While few of my respondents mentioned it, other accounts suggest that harassment or “trolling” may disproportionately affect women or female-appearing avatars, just as women are more likely to be targets of harassment or violence in the actual world. By listing her husband as her partner, Holly avoided some of this negative behavior that is often directed at single women.

Sexual Subcultures

Second Life, like much of the Internet, can be a safe place for users to explore identities that are taboo outside of the online community. Lee told me about her experience in Gor, a subculture based on a series of novels that incorporated elements of S&M and master/slave relationships:

[My second partner, Steven] was into the rape and capture sims, cause he liked rough role play, sex roleplay. So, that’s how [my alt avatar] Lissa was actually born. She was there, decided to go to Gor, thought maybe he could control his appetite by giving him into some of it, without him having to wander around. It didn’t work.

And my current partner came to me courtesy of Gor, actually, because Lissa was a free woman. Steven had... freed Lissa and that was the person she was made for. I mean, literally he picked the shape, he picked the colors. I met Waterhawk because at that point, Lissa had been free. The master-slave relationship is kinda interesting. I had never had any desire to try it.... Lissa was a free woman, and she was traveling at that point, trying to find a home still, trying to decide if she was going to stay in Gor. I was reading the Gorean forums, and Waterhawk had offered to escort... free women. So, Waterhawk agreed to escort Lissa.... And Lissa slipped after an outlaw attacked them and Waterhawk defended [her].... Lissa made a comment that a free woman should not make. Um, indicating dependence on a man. Women are not dependent on the men,

and he immediately picked up on it and would not let me off the spot and I ended up submitting to him and wearing his collar.

This incident was extremely revealing about the gender roles Lee/Lissa was expected to play in the context of Gor. Lissa was initially created, not for Lee's pleasure, but for her partner Steven's, down to the shape of her body and the clothes that she wore. As a free woman, Lissa gained her autonomy, but was forbidden from expressing any dependence on anyone else. When Lissa violated this precept, she became enslaved again, this time to the more-benevolent Waterhawk. These are extremely narrow forms of interpersonal relationships from which to choose, somewhat reminiscent of the virgin/whore dichotomy. Yet Lee was a willing participant in all of these situations.

The issue of in-world relationships revisits the question of "reality" covered in the second chapter. This time, instead of posing the question "What constitutes real people?" the question, "What constitutes real sex and love?" arises. But it is couched in a gendered environment. Emotional involvement in relationships, presumed interest in sex, even the power differentials of the master/slave relationship are experienced through the lens of gender, even in the virtual world of Second Life.

Hypergender

In his actual life, Don was a lanky, medium-height older man, with thinning, graying hair. He looked like the middle-school computer teacher that he is. But in Second Life, he was a long-haired rockstar, looking young and muscular, with dark hair and a scruffy face that might be the next thing to grace the cover of a magazine, if it weren't an avatar. "[My wife] took one look at my avatar, and was like, 'That's what you wish you looked like?' I said, 'Well, no, but that's the way it turned out. I don't

know what to tell you'.... She really does not like Second Life." Even before his pretty boy incarnation, Don's avatar was deeply masculine:

Don: The one place that everybody wanted me to sing, the person that managed it kind of made me feel like a caveman, y'know, my knuckles are dragging on the ground.... [she] was really interested [in my music], but said, you've really got to fix yourself up if you think you're going to get on a stage in my place... I must have had half my inventory filled with stuff she gave me, places to go for skins, shapes, hair, clothes.

Karen: So what did you look like when you started, and what do you look, how do you look different now?

Don: I kind of looked like a mashed-in truck driver. Big frame, and my arms really did, like, almost drag the knuckles on the ground.... I had a Mohawk haircut, had this dangly earring out of one ear, and I was wearing Harley clothes.... And I'm pretty happy with the way he looks right now. Uh, he's about seven foot... I have, y'know, wish I had six-pack abs... But uh, the ladies really like it.

Ultimately, Don portrayed far more idealized masculine images in Second Life than he does in actual life. He didn't seem especially dissatisfied with his actual-world looks, except possibly his thinning hair. But when given the opportunity to construct his body from scratch, the results were noticeably different, and called upon more idealized cultural roles of masculinity. Both the "caveman" look and the more sophisticated rocker are different ideal models of masculinity, ones that, given Don's age and apparent body type, he was unlikely to ever embody in the actual world.

This sort of metamorphosis is no surprise to those involved in Second Life. Lee told me right away that, "the most obvious theme you're going to find is that we don't look like we do in-world." It's widely accepted by users that very few other users are representing their actual-life bodies, and there's no expectation that the way one looks in-world will bear any resemblance to the way one looks in actual life. My goal is not to point fingers at those claiming to look one way while having actual bodies that look

another, but I do question categorizing such disparities as somehow insignificant. Instead, I contend that the ways in which users construct these alternate appearances in Second Life is indicative of cultural meanings ascribed to the body, particularly within the realm of gender and gender expression, which I will discuss further in chapter four. Don exemplified this disparity in the disconnect he experienced between how he expected to be perceived, and how he was actually perceived within Second Life.

Karen: So, they have a sort of different perception of you.

Don: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, yeah. This like hot sexy guy. I'm like, wait a minute, I'm fifty-eight years old. Y'know, I'm going bald. I mean, I'm, cause I'm seeing me, and you're seeing my avatar.

When other users looked at Don in Second Life, they didn't see his actual-life body. Instead, they saw an intricately constructed masculinity, and its accompanying cultural meanings. Second Life users see what I will term "hypergender". Don's avatar appeared extremely masculinized in culturally-sanctioned ways. Users with female avatars often choose appearances that conform to feminine ideals. No matter what kinds of physical bodies they may have, users use Second Life as an opportunity to conform more strictly to idealized gendered bodies. Whatever transgressions they may otherwise make, they perform gender "correctly," excessively, almost fanatically. Holly described the lengthy process she went through to get her avatar, Thea, just right:

Thea has gone through many different creations. At first, you get in there with the generic avatar body, and there's no good skin, there's no good hair.... This one character took so much time with me to help me, went to the stores with me, said try on these demos, and then told me how it looked, and oh, go to the next, try this one, y'know, try on that one. The body shapes and the different kinds of skins, and they were like, one time, the person, they phrased it as like they were, they were polishing crystals, is how they phrased it. Or like they were like trying to help me create myself.

They're into making skins and body shapes now. And so, they one time said, "that skin you have, or that body shape, just," y'know, and they would be kind of critical of it, not in the real negative way, but they would say, your neck is too tall. It needs to be a little bit shorter. Or, your shoulders need to be this or that. I'm open minded, y'know, I'm flexible. If I need to change something, let me go into appearance and fix it or make it look more proportional or whatever, and so, they actually made a body shape, which was made for me. Because it's like, the one I have now, I just, I just love it. It's just the exact shape of the face, and I can't modify it at all. I can't change the, I mean, you can get one of those expression things to make your facial expressions change. But I can't change the height, I can't change anything about it, cause it's just, that's the shape.

Holly spent a lot of time with her friend trying to create the perfect body shape. Now that she has an appearance that she deems "perfect," she never changes or plays with it. The time Holly spent creating Thea mirrors the time women are expected to spend in appearance- and femininity-related activities. The eye of criticism that Holly and her friend turned on Thea is one that everyone, but especially women, are expected to turn on themselves. This is not a more technologically-advanced form of playing dress-up. It's deeply tied to individuals' culturally-situated identities. Holly's body project was clearly extremely important to her, and she was determined to control the way she appears in Second Life in absence of much control over her appearance in the actual world.

Despite a wide range of available body styles, and infinite possibilities available to clothing designers in Second Life, a distinctly sexualized look often dominates popular appearances in Second Life, no matter the particular style involved. In a recent discussion on the presence of sex workers in Second Life, one member of the Second Life in Education (SLED) email list wrote that she felt others may overestimate the number of sex workers because of the "different standards of appropriate dress in SL and

RL”. She suggested that while many Second Life outfits might imply sex work if worn in actual life, she knew that they are simply a common mode of dress in Second Life, where all users are presumably adults, the climate is not an issue, and “everybody has a body that’s suitable for revealing clothing” (Ogborn 2009). According to her, everyday dress and bodies in Second Life are easily mistaken for sex workers (or for our popular notions of what sex workers look like). This suggests the normalization of an extremely sexualized appearance, mirroring standard avatars, especially many female avatars, in the world of video games.

Lee mentioned that her Gorean (S&M) avatar, Lissa, got a very different reaction from other users than her primary avatar, Belle did. “Once you accept the collar, you’re not expected to be quite as independent as Belle is.... Belle just kind of lives her Second Life.” Here, Lee told me that the sexual identities of her avatars affect their personalities or gender presentations in the world. Her Gorean avatar, Lissa, was both innately sexualized by her identity as a slave in Gor, and acted in more stereotypically feminized ways than Lee’s other avatar, Belle, who didn’t participate in this subculture. Similarly, Sue told me that her avatar in Second Life was more traditionally feminine than she is in the actual world. “I would actually say, to answer that for me, is I, I actually have her as more feminine. Much more feminine than I am” As such, her avatar is, if not sexualized, at least more strictly gender-conforming.

A kind of culture-wide body dysphoria is played out through the disciplining of controllable, virtual bodies to express hypergender, a term I’m using to identify traditional expressions of gender taken to the extreme. Mike identified this in other

avatars: “One of the things that I find, not, they don’t do anything for me, are the, uh, the cartoon-y avatars that have exaggerated features, in the sense of, usually hips, but breasts, that kind of stuff. It’s like, get a grip.” Here, Mike is noticing and criticizing hypergendered female avatars, women with exaggerated hips and breasts, tiny waists, perfectly-styled (and often long) hair, who frequently dress in sexualized ways. This Barbie-doll body image is often-decried by feminists who critique media representations of women, but it’s found in abundance in Second Life, which can be seen as a safe place to play with sexual expression. Fragoso and Rosario find much the same in their quantitative study of avatar appearances:

There was a clear predominance of certain facial features and physical shapes amongst the avatars analyzed, principally: straight hair, fair skin, large eyes, strong cheekbones, small mouth, fine nose, tall and slender bodies with Vitruvian proportions. The majority of women had a slim waist, full breasts, delicate faces, small noses, full lips and long hair. Amongst the men predominated large chests, defined biceps, narrow hips, and short hair. These characteristics follow a contemporary Caucasian pattern of beauty that is ever present in Western media (2008, 11).

As Fragoso and Rosario suggest above, men are not exempt from hypergender, either.

Lorber and Moore describe the idealized male body that emerges from reading the images in a spread in *People* magazine:

It is difficult to decipher [a] preference for one man over the next when the pictures on page after page seem to show the same male body, slightly modified by hair color, clothing, or gestures. This body is usually tall, muscular, sexy, and the face is handsomely “chiseled” into White or White-looking features – and Adonis. In Greek mythology, Adonis was a handsome young man loved by the goddess Venus. In our own society, an Adonis is a model of male beauty.... In Western contemporary cultures, a sampling of popular images would suggest that the ideal male body is over six feet tall, 180 to 200 pounds, muscular, agile, with straight white teeth, a washboard stomach, six-pack abs, long legs, a full head of hair, a large penis (discreetly shown by a bulge), broad shoulders and chest, strong

muscular back, clean shaven, healthy, and slightly tanned if White, or a lightish brown if Black or Hispanic. Asian Adonises are rarely seen. With such imagery all around them, boys and men in Western societies are encouraged to emulate this perfection. (2006, 113-114)

Men are increasingly feeling pressure to conform to unrealistic standards of male beauty, as women have for many decades. As with women, these standards have grown increasingly impossible to achieve over time. Lorber and Moore point out that, for instance, G.I. Joe gained 1.5 inches in his biceps, a 29 inch waist, and increased muscle definition between his inception in 1964 and his redesign in 1991 (2006, 63). Both men and women are facing increasing pressure to have decreasingly achievable bodies. This is fully evident in the gendered bodies found in Second Life. Given the ability to easily modify the virtual body, conformity to beauty standards is merely a matter of a few clicks. But this conformity happens in distinctly gendered ways. Women increase the size of their breasts and hips, and decrease the size of their waists; men increase the breadth of their shoulders, the definition of their muscles, and their height. Everyone seems to carefully choose their hair. And by participating in Second Life, users find themselves in a world saturated with these “perfect” and perfected bodies. They aren’t merely the purview of media images, designed for commerce. They’re the bodies of the populace of Second Life, normalized by their pervasiveness, even as my participants cheerfully recognize the unrealistic nature of these images. By participating in a world filled with such idealized bodies, these standards are likely to become even more entrenched. Balsamo writes, ““What I read are not simply textual or media *representations* of the gendered body, but more specifically cultural practices of ‘making the body gendered’” (1996, 4). In Second Life, the process of creating the gendered body

is certainly more transparent and available to be read; each user encounters it when she or he begins building her avatar. At the same time, in a world of perfect bodies, the absurdity of this practice becomes more normalized and more invisible.

Gender in Virtual Worlds

Can gender be divorced from the body? Gender identity isn't predicated on the body, per Judith Butler and transgendered people. Gender and biological sex don't always align, and sexed bodies are not determinate of any particular gender identity. Rather, we act upon our bodies to encourage them to conform to particular gender identity. In my identification as a woman, I learn that I ought to have a particular kind of body – thin, large-breasted, and attractive to heterosexual men. If my body doesn't properly resemble this gender ideal, I might undertake body projects like dieting, using cosmetics, or having plastic surgery, to better fulfill gender expectations or express my gender. As such, while gender may not be determined by the body, the body is determined, at least in part, by gender.

Balsamo writes,

The widespread technological refashioning of the “natural” human body suggests that gender too would be ripe for reconstruction.... Indeed, the gendered boundary between male and female is one border that remains heavily guarded despite new technologized ways to rewrite the physical body in the flesh. So it appears that while the body has been recoded within discourses of biotechnology and medicine as belonging to an order of culture rather than of nature, gender remains a naturalized marker of human identity (1996, 9).

Thus, when users place importance on their gender identity, but minimize the importance of their virtual bodies, a contradiction occurs. Claims that their Second Life bodies aren't important are suspect. In the next chapter, I will be interpreting some of the cultural

understandings of gender and the body that my respondents are expressing through their embodied self-making in Second Life.

4. Meanings of the Virtual Body

In the last chapter, I suggested that gendered behavior seemed flexible within Second Life, and that gender play may be taboo in actual-world discussions, but is certainly not unusual in-world. Second Life affords a space for gender play, but under a strictly controlled set of understandings of gendered embodiment. Men may be women, women may be men, all of this may be temporary and mutable. But what it means to be a woman or a man is not only relatively fixed within existing gender schemata, but also further narrowed by idealized, hypergendered bodies. Second Life offers the promise of increased freedom in nearly all arenas, including gender and the body, but this promise is limited by the internalized gender schemata that prompt users to recreate and reify an existing narrow conception of gender that is grounded in the body.

Semiotization Revisited

I want to revisit the concept of semiotization, which I raised in chapter two. In Second Life, the body acts not as a flesh-and-blood biological entity, nor as an empty vessel for the mind and the will, but as a sign, a signifier of oneself. Balsamo makes the point here that symbolic constructs are constructed within a mediated discourse. She quotes Susan Suleiman, saying, “The cultural significance of the female body is not only (not even first and foremost) that of a flesh-and-blood entity, but that of a *symbolic construct*. Everything we know about the body...exists for us in some form of discourse:

and discourse, whether verbal or visual, fictive or historical or speculative, is never unmediated, never free of interpretation, never innocent” (qtd. in Balsamo 1996, 23). Thus, the virtual body is necessarily mediated by the cultural setting(s) in which it was created. Balsamo makes this argument regarding the female body in particular, but I believe it to be equally true of the male body. No one is free from the effects of discursive power, even those who may have an advantage in traditional power hierarchies, and as the definition of the normative body becomes narrower and narrower, both male and female bodies become even more subject to the disciplining forces of the discursive body.

Second Life advertises that anything is possible in-world; a number of respondents took from that premise that Second Life allows for one to be one’s “true self” unencumbered by the constraints of the body, thereby reifying the Cartesian split. Virtual worlds allow for interaction without the kind of long-term consequences that are unavoidable in actual life, such as job repercussions, or decreased relationships. If one makes a faux pas, or does something that is genuinely unforgivable or unforgettable, she or he can quickly escape it by creating another avatar. If one holds a menial job, but dreams of greatness, she or he can make claims to that greatness without being forced to back up those claims. If one is queer and closeted, or single and wishing to be married (or vice-versa), one can change his or her perceived relationship status with a few words. And if one is too short, too tall, too thin, too fat, too bony or curvy or dark or light or has bad hair or is simply considered ugly, all of that is “fixed” in an instant when constructing a virtual body.

But in what way can this be considered a “true” self? If one is actually a short, fat, closeted married man working at the local grocery store, then in what ways can he “truly” be a tall, physically fit artist with a committed male lover, as he may see himself to be in Second Life? More than a few of my respondents subscribed to a belief in this kind of alternative “true” self. For instance, Jenny told me that she always felt that her hair would be red, were it not her natural brown, and now grey. Mike claimed to related best to others through his female avatar, which he felt was a facet of himself. Don insisted repeatedly that his rock-star-esque avatar was “just like him,” a 58-year-old computer teacher who sang in church choir. Obviously, there is little or no objective truth to the claims of being like these avatars in the ways I have described. But my respondents are not living in a world of delusion or dysphoria. They know what I see when I look at them across the interview table, or when they look at themselves in the mirror. What they are trying to tell me is that the cultural meanings we have ascribed to their actual bodies are not accurate or adequate descriptors of themselves. It is not that Jenny believed she had red hair instead of grey. Rather, one or more of the meanings we ascribe to red-headed-ness – being mischievous, having a temper, possessing an above-average sex drive – appealed to her, and she wished to invoke them. Don didn’t believe he was a young rock star, but he identified very strongly as a musician and a singer, and knew that his rock star appearance let others know about this part of his identity in a way that his actual appearance didn’t.

Lee explicitly claimed that Second Life allows users to show their authentic selves: “In Second Life, you can be yourself, and it’s my theory that people who are

good-natured, and truly nice are the ones that, that shine forth, and the ones that have a real attitude for drama and crap and all the other stuff, no matter how nice they are in real life, that's the way they are truly." This implies a stable, authentic, inner self, the way one "truly" is, which then may or may not be conveyed by the appearance of the actual outer body. Second Life gives users an opportunity to create a body in consonance with their perceived inner self, and this is the moment of semiotization, when the body becomes not a likeness or a biological entity, but a symbol for others to interpret. This is a moment of Cartesian dualism, where users make a claim to an "inner" self that is separate from the body, a concept that I reject in the introduction. Heyes suggests some of the troubling aspects inherent in this concept of an authentic inner self housed in a corporeal outer self, which she calls the "somatic individual": "My ethical resistance to the picture of the somatic individual comes not only from critique of its ontology – the misguided notion of the appropriately gendered, slender, white, or beautiful authentic person living "within" the failed body that one must come to know and actualize" (2007, 11). Heyes makes the point that not only is the idea of an authentic "inner" self dismissive of the actual body one might have, but that this inner-self is often the object of sexist and/or racist beliefs – that one is "really" thin or "really" light-skinned on the inside. It is not the case, as Lee implies, that bodies are somewhat meaningless and one's stable, essential personality is the basis for judgment in Second Life. Instead, it is the very fact that the virtual body is sculpted by the personality, the supposed inner self, that makes it meaningful. The inner self is the self that is deemed worthy of positive evaluation, which the thin body (or the white body, or the normatively-gendered body)

receives. When the two are in contradiction, confusion ensues, as in the case of Holly's business partner. She told me he looks like a devil, but "he's still nice and everything, he's a good person." But she admits that other people react to him based on his appearance: "they're more defensive, and they're kind of scared of him." While Holly believes that his pleasant personality shines through in the end, his virtual body gives the first impression – in this case, a frightening, potentially dangerous one – and others base their reactions and interactions on that appearance. The avatar is more than a value-free image, or even a representation of one's supposed "true self". As Frago and Rosario put it, "The avatar is ... a set of signs through which the subject seeks to construct a believable representation" (2008, 315). Hayles hopes for information technology to change the relationship between sign and signifier: "Information technologies do more than change modes of text production, storage, and dissemination. They fundamentally alter the relation of signified to signifier. Carrying the instabilities implicit in Lacanian floating signifiers one step further, information technologies create what I will call *flickering signifiers*, characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions (1999, 30)." Here, Hayles is suggesting that the multiple levels of signification involved in complex technology (electronic polarities, which are represented by code, which is then represented in graphical user interfaces) offer potential for the introduction of randomness and change. But this is not how technology is experienced by end users; avatars are carefully built and persistent. Randomness or change that isn't introduced by the user him- or herself would be considered an aberration or a bug. The relationships between actual bodies and avatars that my respondents

related to me suggested no such change in the relationship between the signified and the signifier as Hayles suggests; the avatar only conveys meaning through the shared vocabulary of signs, which follows from our existing understanding of bodies and bodily meanings. There is no obvious discursive move to be made, and these signifiers in no way “flicker”. Instead, they steadily reproduce the gender schemata (and other hierarchical power structures) we already know.

More than Skin Deep

The differences between respondents’ physical bodies and their virtual bodies were hardly politically neutral. Uniformly, avatar bodies were described as thinner, taller, and younger-appearing than the respondent’s body. Respondents repeatedly told me that their avatars looked like what they wished they looked like, or like themselves, but a little bit “better”. Most seemed relatively unconcerned with the nature of the difference between themselves and their avatar(s), though they were quick to note it in others.

Jenny told me, “I guess I sort of made her to look like I would have looked if the MS hadn’t kicked in... Because I was aiming for a size 14, and I was almost there. Almost there. Had a couple of 14s I could wear... And then the MS kicked in, and I lost all that. So, she would probably be about a size 14...Somewhat smaller than I probably would have been. But otherwise, I guess she looks like I, like I would like to look.” Jenny saw her avatar, not as striving for a larger set of cultural beauty standards, but as a way of reaching a more ideal body she believed she was capable of before being diagnosed with MS. Her avatar wasn’t a Barbie doll stand-in – Barbie is hardly a size 14 – but a part of Jenny’s identity as she perceived it prior to her MS diagnosis.

Holly described her avatar to me:

I think my height is about 6'6". I mean, in general, y'know, of a normal body weight. But not super skinny. This body is not, like a super model teeny-weeny type body. Um, and, but it's just, y'know, it's a normal body, it's got like a little stomach on it, but it's not, it doesn't look pregnant or anything, even though they have those things, too.... I guess I wanted the body image to be looking normal, to be, y'know, looking like an average person, I mean, um, I, I didn't want to be, I had seen, y'know, the ones with real high heels going around and lingerie and all that, and that wasn't the image I wanted to project, so, but, I mean, it definitely needed to be skinnier [than I am].

Holly herself is a tall, heavy woman, but is nowhere near 6'6". Even with a curvy avatar, one with a "little stomach", the body shape Holly described for her avatar isn't really comparable to her actual body; it's certainly skinnier than she is. Yet Holly told me that her avatar is "a normal body". What, then, does that make the shorter and heavier Holly? Statements like these denormalize the actual body while normalizing the virtual one. Holly claimed that she "definitely needed to be skinnier," but doesn't qualify why she needed to be skinnier, or what a skinnier body would accomplish. Holly told me that she no longer changed or edited her body for her Thea avatar because, "I have the ultimate body, so I don't have to change any more bodies... the body is just exactly what I like." She described her interactions with another avatar who helped her refine her appearance, and ultimately built the body she uses now: "She never, she would never complain about my body, which was interesting. She never, she just said, she didn't really say, she was saying in a helping way, like so I could discover something, not that there's something the matter, or it didn't look right, or, y'know, stuff like that." I suggested this sounded more like a creative process, and Holly immediately agreed. Similarly, Sue noted that her avatar "looks, she looks a lot better, y'know, how I would want to look, but I still

have, y’know, nice rotund areas on her.” At first glance, these are not the hypergendered bodies of the previous chapter, like Don, Lee, or Mike. Despite their hypergendered appearances, none of these avatars have Barbie doll-style bodies. Instead, they are linked to the existing actual self, and a desire for self-improvement. Jenny, Holly, and Sue all considered their avatars to be an improvement over their actual bodies. But these “improvements” are still moves towards hypergender. Specifically, all are thinner and more feminine than their actual-world counterparts. These sorts of differences are also visible in the images in Appendix B, all taken from Robbie Cooper’s *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators*. These images are of users and their corresponding avatars. While some look similar (particularly the last woman with the light blue shirt), all of the avatars are thinner, more shapely, and more explicitly gendered than any of their creators.

Second Life seems to offer the possibility of physical perfection. While most adults understand that nobody is perfect, we work towards culturally-constructed goals of perfection anyway, particularly around gender and the body (as suggested in Butler 1993). In Second Life, those goals seem reachable. The perfect hip-to-waist ratio is possible. The perfect hair is only a click away, and will never get messy in the rain or wind. And so, with so-called perfection a possibility, users spend endless amounts of time defining the details of their avatars, as Holly did, all the while claiming that bodies are unimportant, and that users personalities will shine through. Yet it is through such body work that the personality *does* become apparent, because the bodily claims that users make are deeply telling.

The ways in which respondents had expressed themselves through the virtual body are linked to the meanings we ascribe to certain types of bodies. For instance, thin bodies aren't merely regarded as beautiful, but also as invoking a number of other attributes. Heyes writes, "Fatness declaims sloth, lack of discipline, greed, and failure to moderate appetite" (2007, 9). She adds,

Being slim means being heterosexually attractive, which is the aspect of slenderness most available for feminist critique. However, more profound connotations of thinness include being in control of one's body (and hence one's life) and... being fashionably slender is also associated with upward mobility and intellectual acumen. The deep unhappiness and discomfort experienced by many women with what are euphemistically called 'body image problems' tells us a great deal about how femininity is disciplined in this culture (2007, 59).

Respondents who created thinner avatars weren't merely hoping to be thought attractive, but also were suggesting that they were hard-working, disciplined, and self-controlled. Slenderness is almost obsessively desired and prized in mainstream (white, heterosexual, able-bodied) Western standards of beauty, especially for women. But there are no effective ways to achieve this sort of body in the actual world if one does not have it, outside of extreme starvation diets (Mann 2007). However, Second Life offers this body up for habitation for free, with essentially no effort required. Now, in addition to other messages suggested by thinness, users in Second Life can also make claims to ideal womanhood or particular kinds of valued masculinity. In the third chapter, I showed how participants' avatars are fairly strictly held to gender norms. But if gender transgression is coded as freakish, and "those whose bodies defy neat boundaries of gender or race are often assumed to lack moral integrity" (Heyes 2007, 9), then normatively gendered bodies are making more than a claim to a particular gender or sexual identity. They are

claiming a moral high ground. Respondents are hoping to be more than beautiful or feminine or manly; they have created bodies to be read as morally good. Frago and Rosario's quantitative research also suggests that, "people build their avatars with the features that they consider to be capable of expressing more clearly what they want to state about themselves" (2008, 318-319). While this strategy is understandable in the context of a sexist culture that subscribes to normative gender schemata, it has the effect of further reinforcing embodied gender norms and beauty standards. "Enormous ethical significance attaches to appearance and the decisions we make about changing our bodies" (Heyes 2007, 9). The ways in which we choose to construct ourselves further enforces the gender norms that feminists criticize. Anne Balsamo writes,

In the speculative discourse of [virtual reality], we are promised whatever body we want, which doesn't say anything about the body that I already have and the economy of meanings I already embody. What forms of embodiment would people choose if they could design their virtual bodies without the pain or cost of physical restructuring? If we look to those who are already participating in body reconstruction programs – for instance, cosmetic surgery and bodybuilding – we would find that their reconstructed bodies display very traditional gender and race markers of beauty, strength, and sexuality.... Nor does 'freedom from the body,' imply that people will exercise the 'freedom to be' any other kind of body than the one they already enjoy or desire. (1996, 128).

As Balsamo points out, the ability to create one's own body results in traditionally gendered and raced bodies that do not so much strive towards unrealistic beauty standards as sit on top of them, having finally achieved the (formerly) impossible. Most virtual bodies do not destabilize gender norms or gender-based inequality, but perpetuate them.

Disciplinary Power

While thumbing through the book *Alter Ego*, a collection of photographs of avatars and their creators, Lucas made the following remark:

It's interesting that people who, y'know, a lot of people don't tend to, uh, show their imperfections. They tend to let the avatars kind of be these uber-enhanced people, and they don't, like work to make themselves look more like themselves, if they look less than the avatar, y'know what I mean? I think that's always interesting, too. Because the avatars are always, they come sexy and cool and, y'know, very suave and y'know, like the person you want to hang out with at a club, or, y'know.

Lucas's observations mirror my own. Given the opportunity, imperfections are erased, and perfection is easily obtained. But "perfection" is not wholly, or even mostly, self-determined. Instead, it calls on a set of culturally-determined understandings of what is desirable: thinness, proportionality, lots of hair on one's head, and none elsewhere on the body, and conformity to gender norms. The details expressed may vary: a color preference, the exact hair length, a predilection for wings or skirts or complicated shoes. The basics might as well be set in stone.

This is more than a set of aesthetic preferences, or even culturally held norms; nor is it entirely (or even largely) an effect of the options made available by Second Life creators, Linden Labs. Rather, it is the effects of what Foucault calls disciplinary power. Heyes defines disciplinary power thusly:

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault outlines his historical account of a new form of power: disciplinary power. This...is not a substance but rather a series of circulating relations; it cannot necessarily be located in an individual or institution, but rather is a system of management in which all it touches participate; it operates on the population and on the body, fostering techniques of control, intervention, and regulation often presented as working to mutual benefit. Disciplinary power is constitutive of the subject rather than external to it; it creates – rather than being imposed upon – types of individuals (2007, 6).

Disciplinary power involves internalized surveillance, in which one is not governed by an outside body like a sovereign or the government, but instead by oneself, in accordance with accepted discourse, especially that of discursive bodies. Second Life users are not held to any kind of rules in-world; in fact, Second Life advertises the lack of strictures in its tagline, “Your World. Your Imagination.” This is mostly truth in advertising, at least at the technical level. Limitations occur at the level of users’ imaginations, or when they want to use a set of common symbols to create virtual bodies that can be read by others.

Balsamo describes the role of technology in this process:

In this sense, an apparatus or ‘technology’ articulates power relations, systems of communication, and productive activities or practices; ‘articulate’ here is used both in the sense of “expressing” that which is already given or operative and in the sense of conjoining or connecting. So, following Foucault’s logic, the notion of “technology” describes the workings of a collection of practices that produce specific cultural effects. Technology names the process whereby discursive practices work interdependently with other cultural forces to produce effects at the level of the body. These effects, in turn, become part of an apparatus of control (1996, 21).

While I hesitate to generalize that all forms of technology become apparatuses of control, it’s no surprise that tools and technology made within a specific cultural context are subject to these same cultural forces. But in Second Life, the technology itself seems relatively neutral. All kinds of bodies are possible, either for purchase or with sufficient expertise in the environment, and this is part of Second Life’s appeal at this historical moment. The forces that shape the virtual body are not inherent to the technology of Second Life. Instead, they are imported into the technologically-based world by the users. As such, they reproduce existing gender norms rather than creating new forms of gender expression.

5. Conclusion

I began this study to examine the kinds of differences between constructions of identity in Second Life and actual life, and the way these differences are part of gender performance. I hoped to learn how Second Life users perform gender through virtual embodiment, and whether these strategies fulfilled a potential for the destabilization of normative gender identities. At the beginning of this study, I was hopeful for the possibility that Second Life might make the abstract concepts of the partial, destabilized self/selves more transparent, particularly the constructedness of gender. If my virtual self is “really” me, but my actual self exists in the colloquial “real” world, then the stability of reality is called into question. Additionally, given the fact that most tools in Second Life are user-wielded or user-created, Second Life technology has a unique opportunity to be used for resistance to existing power structures. While Foucault suggests that technology is always used to reproduce existing systems of domination, Balsamo disagrees:

When discussing new technologies, it is important to try to avoid the trap of technological determinism that argues that these technologies necessarily and unilaterally expand the hegemonic control by a techno-elite. Technologies have *limited* agency.... Perhaps a better approach for evaluating the meaning of these new technologies is to try to elaborate the ways in which such technologies and, more importantly, the *use* of such technologies, are determined by broader social and cultural forces (1996, 123).

I, too, have largely concerned myself with the question of how technologies are used in relation to our existing gender system. Technology has enormous potential, both for further enabling disciplinary power, surveillance, and gender-based dominance, and for allowing new expressions of gender, identity, and sociality.

In chapter two, I examined the differences between users and their avatars, and found that many of these differences involved the creation of an idealized virtual body that often didn't resemble the physical, actual body. I also suggested that many users used their avatars to visually express elements of their own identities. In chapter three, I explored the ways that gender was performed by participants in Second Life, particularly how it was performed through the virtual body. I found that users expressed a kind of extreme gender, which I termed hypergender. In chapter four, I connected the cultural meanings of gendered bodies with the identity work in which users were engaging, and the hypergendered bodies that resulted. I claim that, by displaying ideally gendered bodies, users are making claims to certain desirable identity traits, such as self-control, culturally-appropriate sexuality, and moral goodness.

Ultimately, I found that avatars in Second Life simultaneously reify gendered bodily ideals while allowing individuals to explore their own gender and sexuality within these ideals. But it is a stretch to claim that the constant invocation of these gendered bodily ideals is some kind of gender freedom or gender equality. Instead, it is easier than ever to find fault with one's own actual body when comparing it to the perfect virtual body. Virtual body projects are effective and rewarded. Actual body projects (such as diets, plastic surgery, bodybuilding, etc.) often come with side effects or failure. In no

way does Second Life suggest that appearances don't matter, or that the person behind the avatar is the only one that counts, as some respondents claimed. Rather, it lets the person behind the avatar have it all: a personality that feels authentic, and a body that matches. Rather than opening up the possible meanings of varied body appearances, it further narrows them.

My study is limited by the small sample size of respondents. Certainly, there seem to be Second Life users who create bodies in resistance to gender norms, even if they may not account for most Second Life users. However, searches for gender variant users or spaces using the Second Life search tools have almost exclusively returned highly sexualized spaces, such as BDSM groups and sex clubs. This raises the question of what kinds of gender non-conformity are performed in Second Life, and what relationship(s) they have to users' identities. The context of sex work, particularly, suggests that gender non-conformity may be performed for the enjoyment of spectators, for income, or as a form of play, rather than out of a desire to express a particular identity or to call on cultural meanings associated with resistance to gender norms outside of the context of the BDSM community or sex work. This is an avenue for further research. While Lee participated a particular BDSM subculture, she did not express any involvement with gender variant appearances or behaviors. No other members of these particular subcultures responded to my general requests for participants in this study, which was a constraint on my research. Since these communities are often misrepresented or sensationalized by the popular press and sometimes insulated from other areas of Second Life, measures to specifically reach out to these users may be

required in order to further study gender in Second Life. I also spent some time in spaces dedicated to transgender users, who often organize together to provide support and information. But, like my respondents, most trans-identified users that I've encountered have relatively normatively gendered bodies, generally of the gender with which the individual user identifies. Even among a population that may be especially well-positioned to recognize the fluidity and construction of meanings of the body, outward appearances in Second Life seem to reify the traditional bodily meanings.

I've detailed the ways in which avatars can reproduce actual-world discourse around ideally gendered bodies, but feminist theory suggests that disciplinary power is not absolute:

Disciplinary power enhances our capacities and develops new skills; it trains us and offers ways of being in the world that can be novel, transformative, or appealing. However much the social institutions I identify urge us to conform ourselves to discipline's preferred subjectivity, we always exceed its grasp in some moment: individuals are not thoroughly dominated by a fully coherent system that endows us with a singular subjectivity. The very complexity and slipperiness of disciplinary practices prevents them maintaining the degree of coherence required for a situation of complete domination, and it is in these fissures that counter-attack might occur (Heyes 2007, 8).

Graphical user-based virtual worlds like Second Life have only begun to be studied, and while Second Life's popularity may be fleeting, as many technology phenomena are, virtual worlds themselves are likely here to stay, and will only become more visually-oriented as technology continues to improve. Heyes' belief in the opportunity for resistance in disciplinary power begs further investigation of the ways resistance is performed and experienced in virtual worlds. I would be particularly interested in the experiences and strategies of users who actively use their avatars to resist gender norms,

whether as a political statement, an identity project, or in the commercial setting of sex work. What can these users tell us about the strategic moves available to create new subjectivities and identities, or to escape stable identity all together? I do not believe that new technology necessarily constrains us to reproduce old forms of inequality; it is up to users to determine the direction in which these new possibilities will take us.

Appendix A: Glossary

Alt - Slang (popular usage) for an account owned and played by a real-life person who also has other Second Life accounts. In common usage, the Second Life resident is referred to by their first or most renowned account name, and other account names are known as "alts". For example: "Oh, that was me on my alt" or "Secondary Dude is Main Guy's alt". Short for "alternate account".

Avatar - 1) The digital representation of your virtual self in Second Life. Or, in plain English, the character in Second Life that's you; 2) Other people's characters. 3) A "costume" or outfit; a full set of avatar body parts, clothing, and/or attachments that provides a specific look, sometimes available for purchase.

Local Chat/Voice - Voice Chat or Instant Messages that are only available to avatars close to your location.

In-world/Inworld - 1) Anything that takes place within the virtual environment of Second Life. 2) The state of being logged into Second Life.

Island - A simulator / region that is detached from the main continent and only accessible by directly teleporting to it (i.e. "Cayman is an island sim."). Sometimes also used in the more general definition of the word, to refer to a small land mass surrounded by water.

Newbie - (popular usage) A newcomer to Second Life; a resident who has joined for a relatively short period of time and/or is not familiar or comfortable with Second Life's nuances. Also spelled 'noob' or 'n00b'. Sometimes a derogatory term.

RL – real life.

Sim - A simulator or 'sim' is a square, named region of landmass that makes up part of the Second Life world.

Skins - The texture applied to your Shape. Often designed to look like various shades of human skin.

Teleport - To instantly travel to a location (as opposed to manually walking or flying there). Residents can teleport via the map, with landmarks, or through invitations given by other residents.

Adapted from the Second Life Lexicon at

http://slisweb.sjsu.edu/sl/index.php/Second_Life_Lexicon and the Copely Library's "The Language of Second Life" at

<http://libguides.sandiego.edu/content.php?pid=34908&sid=256681>

Appendix B: Photographs of Second Life Users and their Avatars

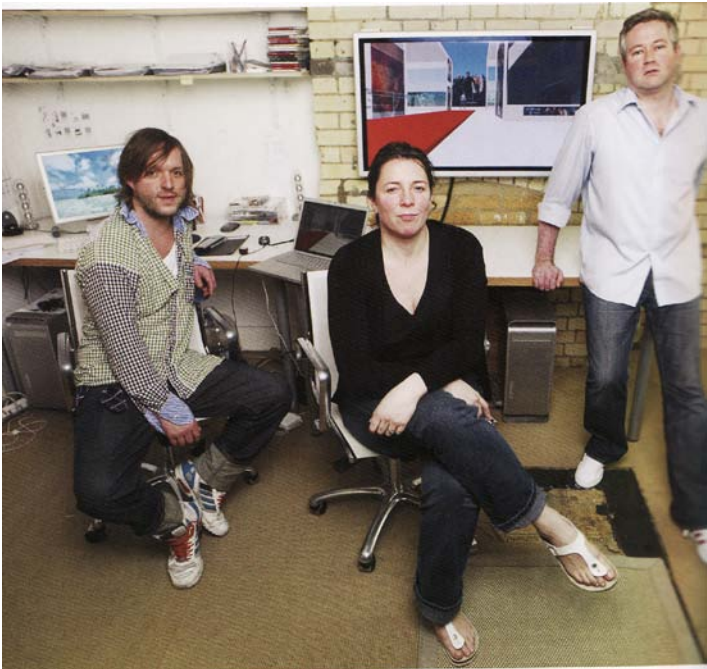


Figure 1: An office of virtual-world workers.

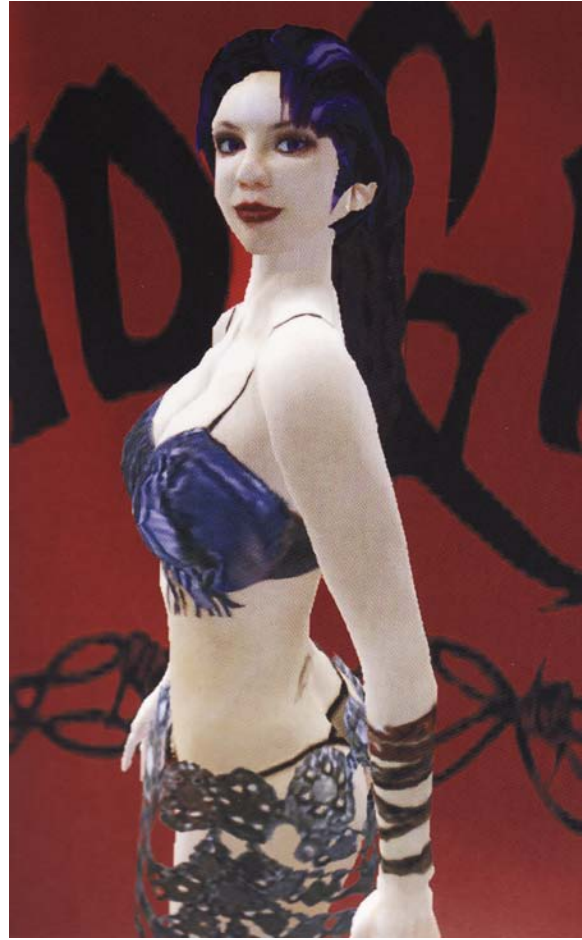


Figure 2: A stay-at-home mom and her avatar



Figure 3: Similar actual and virtual appearances

All images reprinted from *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators* by Robbie Cooper. Used with permission of the author.

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