

February 2009

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Joseph, "Virtually Queer: Subjectivity Across Gender Boundaries in Second Life" (2009). *MG 2009 Proceedings*. 2.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/mg2009/2>

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Virtually Queer: Subjectivity Across Gender Boundaries in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This is an autoethnographic study of one person's experience performing across gender lines in Second Life. Although there is a rich literature on gender crossing in virtual worlds, dating back to the text-only days, there are few ethnographic reports and fewer still from the vantage point of the performer. The paper is presented as a narrative recounting, alternating voice between the performed female persona in the virtual world and the author's performed male identity in real life. Taking the perspective of Queer Theory, the paper problematizes gender performance in any world, and takes tentative steps toward expanding the notion of identity queering to nonsexual aspects of the individual as well as the prospect of "queering reality" itself.

Keywords

Virtual reality, autoethnography, gender, gender performance, queer theory, identity

As I'm lying in bed this morning, the first thing that greets my eyes is the statue of Yemaya, a West African Sea goddess, resting on the dresser beneath the window that looks out from the back of my small apartment. She's a comforting image, with all her associations of caregiving and childhood trips to the beach. My bedroom walls are decorated with pre-Raphaelite paintings of scenes from water myths: a naiad encounters a young male sleeping by a forest stream; Narcissus gazes at his reflection, while a beautiful girl, one breast seductively exposed, gazes at him forlornly and ignored. I tend to obsess over water images; when I was a kid I always dreamed of being a mermaid at Weeki Wachee Springs. I've made my new apartment something of a shrine to all that.

I get up, stretch, check the time, and spend a few minutes figuring out what to wear. Nothing much on the calendar this lazy weekend day, but I'll likely be outside a good bit, so I grab jeans and sneakers and a light camisole. While fixing my hair I take a good look at myself: pale skin and a galaxy of freckles that people have said reminds them of Sissy Spacek or Lindsay Lohan. Lately I've taken to wearing my hair short and straight. I really do wear a lot less makeup these days and feel a kind of pride in being "natural".

I like to think I'm not vain but I do tend to think about how I'll look when I meet a group of women friends later for coffee and conversation at a new café downtown. This is a group of around a half-dozen women I met shortly before renting this apartment--in fact they were a big reason I moved in here, a cooperative housing community that just opened up last year. There's a range of ages and temperaments in our subgroup but a nice chemistry that makes our times together enjoyable, whether we're laughing about someone's husband or new boyfriend, strategizing a shopping expedition, or solving the world's problems in a late-night tête-à-tête in someone's living room in front of a fireplace.



We've taken to calling our group The Pirates; it speaks to our adventurous spirit and a kind of girl-power ethos that permeates our adventures. We're not like the women of Sex in the City—not high-maintenance or anxiety-ridden or otherwise particularly notable. Some of us are married or have steady boyfriends, and at least one member of the group identifies as a lesbian. But we're independent, a bit wacky, and tightly knit. Most of us have advanced degrees.

I walk through a thin curtain of falling water that separates the bedroom from the living room, and say hello to the small school of reef fish that always circle near the ceiling. I've brought them here as yet another representation of the sea and of life-giving water. On the porch outside, my watch-octopus, Octavia, mumbles something about blue crabs.

Tonight my friends and I plan to visit the Island of Jabberwock, where we'll rez up some sailing ships and engage in a round of naval battles. I love to watch the cannonballs fly and the way the resulting fires sweep the decks—especially if it's not my ship. After all, the losers sink to the bottom of the bay with their ships, unless they're adept enough to fly back to shore. Maybe afterwards I'll watch the others swordfight; it's really stirring to watch how the lifeless bodies of those killed rise from the ground in a beam of light and return to vivid life.

All that's where the Pirates label came from, of course.

Just before stepping out the front door I suddenly recall a troubling dream from last night. It's part of a recurrent series that is really starting to make me wonder about myself. In the dream I imagine I'm a character in someone's imagination, or simply playing a role on stage, or—worst of all—an avatar in a huge, complex virtual world.

What's most troubling about the avatar dreams is that in them I'm being operated by a man, of all things: a gendered heterosexual male. The very idea! I suppose I've been reading too much of that Sherry Turkle book (*Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*) and all the other literature on gender-bending and gender-swapping online: in text-only

multiuser domains (MUDs and MOOs), chat rooms, video games, and multiuser role playing games (MMORPGs) and virtual environments (MUVES). It's gotten where I will daydream about my imaginary amanuensis, and I've actually worked up quite a detailed persona, which I've begun incorporating into a character study for the fiction workshop I take on Wednesdays. It's good practice, anyway.

I imagine he's learned about this new virtual-reality medium called *Second Life* that incorporates all other computer-mediated forms, such as text, animation, video, and sound. What makes the medium especially compelling to him is its social nature, whereby users who are experiencing media content can also experience (at least indirectly) the other members of the audience (as avatars), and indeed can create their own media experience on the fly, by engaging in virtual conversation in a visually engaging and immersively "real" space.

Like many people, he's been involved in online communities and relationships via the 'Net for many years, and is no stranger to acting out roles and personas, either. He's in his late 40s and he's played many roles, on stage and off: father, husband, Judas in *Godspell*, a junior-high teacher, security guard, writer – I don't want to get unrealistic but this is probably a fairly believable range of roles for the average human being.

I had to make him a writer like me in order to give him a sensible rationale for playing a woman in this "virtual reality" of his. So I've imagined that he's doing the same thing I'm doing now (yes, not very original!): using it as a way to further develop a recurring character from his magical-realist tales, which are set in a place called Florida (well, his stories are a bit *florid*), against a mystical and mythological backdrop that incorporates the place's colorful history and the powerful role of water there. He's been rather derivative of classical water mythology in his stories, and since much of that (sea goddesses, naiads, mermaids, etc.) is personified as female, he's had a recurring feminine character whose nature is sometimes real, sometimes supernatural, and sometimes not entirely resolved. The last time he created one such character, whom he called Nadia in the short story *And certain stars shot madly from their spheres* (Clark, 2003)□, he found himself "inhabiting" her so emotionally that she became almost a reified Jungian anima, following him around psychologically. You might say he fell in love with her, as narcissistic as that sounds.

So it was that after playing around with the affordances of this virtual world for a few months that he decided to see what he could do about bringing her to virtual life there. He'd already created a fairly "realistic" avatar to represent himself, though it's somewhat idealized (no, I have not met him—but that's an interesting thought). I even went to the trouble of sketching out a fairly realistic image of his avatar, shown at right.

I'm not sure if he overheard someone else talking about bringing "actual" fictional characters to life, or was inspired by the truly impressive complexity of the invented personas of some players who've been schooled in over a decade of online role playing. Whatever the cause, he started looking around for ways to create a naiad--not a Weeki Wachee mermaid, but something more ambiguous, less over the top, yet clearly a creature of the water. He thought of mythological creatures, of the transparent water-tentacle from the movie *The Abyss*, of dolphins and crabs, and began shopping for clothing and gear with which to kit himself out. He doesn't just want to create a costume, but a persona.



Shortly he finds a free "water nymph" costume that will do for a start, though he finds it a bit embarrassingly sexy and of course it was immediately apparent that he'll would need to change his avatar's shape—which you might say is fortunate for me. Here's a bit of his academic jargon describing the process, from a chapter I've been workshopping most recently:

* * * * *

This was my first experience with what the literature describes as the erotic/power motivation for men who choose to play

women online: I quickly realized I would have a "woman's" body at my complete beck and call, to define and shape in whatever ways my contemporary-culture-sodden male psyche wished. Tall Amazon or petite waif? Playboy breasts or A-cups? Accentuated hips or boyishly slender? I'll not deny that the time spent in a "changing room" with my avatar splayed out on a posing stand was pleasant, a kind of concretized tour both of my personal (and evolving) sense of idealized physical femininity and of my recollections of lovers past and present.

This is consistent with Yee's (2003, p.2) survey results and what Kennedy describes as the ability to obtain "mastery and control of a body coded as female within a safe and unthreatening context"(Kennedy, 2002) Or as she describes it further:

"Technology becomes a means of extending or transcending the body as the final site of the monstrous feminine other, as well as providing opportunities for the playing out of fantasies of conquest and control of this "other." These hypersexualized versions of virtual femininity are strategies of containment which need to be understood as such."(Kennedy, 2002)

* * * * *

[Monstrous? Hypersexualized? Thank you very much!!]

* * * * *

A frequently derided practice is the "painfully obvious" exaggerated female avatars with large breasts and wearing what Fron et al describe as "kombat lingerie"; these tend to "reveal male fantasies rather than female empowerment" (Fron, et al, 2007, pp. 18-20)□; "just by pressing a button, the player can have game babes put on a sexual performance for him (Lalley, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, this can result in odd pairings:

in the virtual world it was hardly unheard of for straight men to log on as queer women and cruise for girl-girl action, with the predictable result that much if not most of the lesbian sex that took place on the MOO was performed by smirking pairs of mutually deceived male players"(Dibbell, 2007, p. 128)

□

Dibbell observes that contemporary culture, with its patriarchal emphasis on the male as neutral or default, makes men curious about the experience of a "ubiquitous genderedness" that—while it can be oppressive to women, is also an alluring state of being for men who seek female roles and personas (Dibbell, 2007, p. 135)□. Whether it is this or simply the "erotic thrill of having a sexualized body" (Antunes, 1999), this seems a significantly less oppressive and more potentially enlightening activity than donning kombat lingerie. In fact the experience of "'seeing what it is like to be a woman' even in the virtual sense can be jarring and shocking for a man"(Chess, 2008, p. 15)□ although at least one of Yee's (2003) respondents reports that playing the opposite gender helps them write more convincing fictional characters.

Of course, men have been playing female roles and even inhabiting female identities for millennia, and it's nothing new in western culture; it has been with us in public performance (in everything from Shakespeare to Priscilla, Queen of the Desert) and in lifestyle and identity behaviors such as drag and transgenering. Since the advent of online social interactions and virtual worlds beginning in the early 1990s, however, there has been perhaps wider participation in the phenomenon as both men and women take the opportunity to act out "being female" or "being male" in vast networks of users operating in imaginary spaces. Fron, et al (2007) describe this activity against a backdrop of the marginalization of play in contemporary society, but note that "it has an entirely different social function that real-world transgender play, although it may resemble some earlier cultural practices of costume-play" (Fron, et al, 2007, p. 17)□. This is an important distinction: is the avatar a persona or merely a costume? Or does it inhabit a liminal space between, much like an actor inhabits a role?

As to the extent of gender-crossing, Bruckman reported on the prevalence and even normality of males playing female gaming characters as early as 1993, but noted a lack of research on the reasons (Bruckman, 1993, p. 48)□. The numbers are not entirely clear, however, as research has been plagued by conceptual and methodological issues. While much research suggests that most players have tried a cross-gender role, the ratios are muddled. Most recently, one study

reported a huge majority of women over men (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008), but this conflicts with earlier findings. For example, Krotoski asserts “a variety of studies using varying methodologies have suggested that women are less likely to gender-bend than men, preferring to take on physical characterizations that are similar to their perceived offline selves” (Krotoski, 2005, p. 13) □ and Bartle concludes:

previous studies, from the rash of "summer paper" ones that came out in the 1990s to the authoritative ongoing surveys by people like Nick Yee, consistently show that about 40% of male players regularly play a female character and 5% of female players do. The female figure may in truth be higher, but it's much lower than the male figure. The reason for this, which was predicted by feminist theory, was because women regard their bodies as part of who they are to a greater extent than do men (ultimately, because they have periods and babies, but men don't). This means women are more reluctant to play as non-women than men are to play as non-men.”(Bartle, 2008)

□

Older men—perhaps because their sexual identity is more stable, according to one respondent—are more likely to play female roles (Yee, 2003, p. 1) □

The reasons people play opposite their “real” gender are varied and perhaps highly individualized, and in many cases reflect social stereotypes. Many report that the online environment provides a relatively safe and anonymous environment in which to try out other gender roles and experiences and to perhaps explore or express parts of their identity not readily available in other settings (Antunes, 1999; Bruckman, 1993, p. 52; Jones, 2006, p. 25; Krotoski, 2005, p. 13; Nobel, 2006, p. 7). As one study participant noted, “I live in the rural south, and even though I love it here, people are too closedminded. On SL I can look like RuPaul and nobody cares. I can be, be more like myself” (McKeon & Wyche, 2005, p. 25) □. Lee and Hoadley (2006, p. 384) describe “the opportunity to experience life as a member of the minority or “other” population, to investigate the existence of cultural differences, and to gain a better understanding of discrimination and the formation of stereotypes” -- and thus a form of autoethnography (Lee & Hoadley, 2006, p. 384) □. This activity can give players “a broader understanding of gender issues that they may not be able to automatically relate to in real life.” (Chess, 2008, p. 15) □. As Dibbell sums up his experience with his feminine “Samantha” identity:

if being in Samantha's body had the capacity to make me feel pretty, it could also let me feel a kind of ugly that a male body gave me only limited access to. The deeply embedded gender fictions that had brought the power of feminine sexual charm to life inside me turned out to work just as well for the powerlessness of feminine sexual subjugation (Dibbell, 2007, p. 146) □.

Men in particular may swap because they feel it “enables them to experience a greater range of emotional complexity” (Kennedy, 2002) □ and/or “opens up new avenues of personal expression.” (Fron et al., 2007, p. 17) □. More pragmatically, given what was at least initially a male-dominated environment in virtual worlds, many men—especially in goal-oriented games—played women to obtain advantages showered on them by male players currying favor (Bruckman, 1993; Yee, 2003; McKeon & Wyche, 2005; Lee & Hoadley, 2006).

Since SL is not a game per se, there is less reason to play for advantage. It's more likely that the exploratory and/or sex/power fantasy motivations are salient here. But what quickly struck me was the way I was identifying with this creation. I didn't want to exploit her, and felt more like a doctor or gym trainer than a voyeur as I “advised” via slider and dialogue box. “No, you don't want to fall into the Barbie trap. Ah, but those hips are a bit much, perhaps? A little more definition in the upper arms and shoulders.” I also quickly learned that, for me, there is no idealized form but only many possibilities. More on that later.

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Well, you get the idea. I pondered these motivations for my imagined male operator as I rezzed a balloon and floated over to the central business district to meet my friends. I was greeted warmly on arrival and we went through our ritual

a, February 19-21, 2009



round of hugs—something I never see the men do. In fact if there are men present when we're greeting each other they usually comment on how “huggy” we are, and you can tell they want to take part either because of their comments or because of the almost pathetic way they will stand around hoping they'll get hugged too. I think they miss it in their lives, although of course some of them are just looking for a little titillation. When we hug it's warm and physical and completely natural, but I can't imagine it being that way for them. At least—as I say—you never see them doing it. They are much more likely to crack jokes or talk their geek-talk about building or programming or the latest gadgets. We're certainly not above that, since most of my group work in the computer industry, but we're also likely to share more personal information: checking up on relationships, perhaps, or just catching up on mood and feeling.

I'm wondering whether to share my odd dream with them. It's not completely unusual, in our community, to find that someone's gender isn't exactly what you first thought it was—and that can have serious repercussions. I don't want anyone to think I'm planning to “come out” or anything. I imagine my dream-operator feels a little of that trepidation himself.

* * * * *

After some tweaking I ended up with the first iteration of my female avatar and, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, named her Salmakis, after the spring-nymph in Greek mythology who falls so in love with the beautiful son of Hermes and Aphrodite that she asks the gods to unite them—a request taken with typical Olympic whimsy by merging two of them into a single body, the more well known Hermaphrodite (whose iconically queer statue transfixed me when I visited the Louvre).

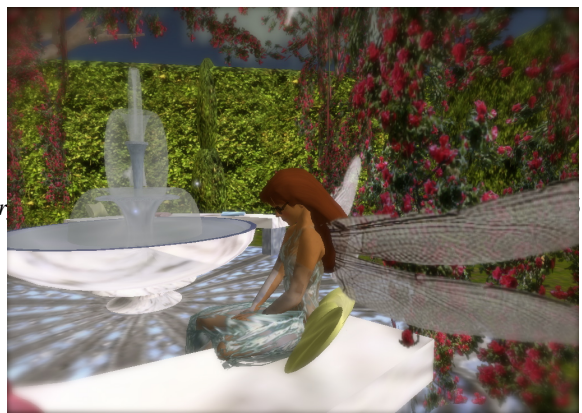
So Salmakis was the role and the physical manifestation, even though to everyone I would meet in SL I was still identified by my user handle JS Saltwater. Still, even in this early form, as Salmakis I stepped out into SL--feeling a little like a nervous debutante at the ball. Would I be accepted? Laughed off? Assaulted? After all, the literature is rife with examples of negative reactions to gender-swapping, especially that done by men. To some, it's “revolting” (McKeon & Wyche, 2005, pp. 25-26) or dangerous and manipulative (Hobler, 2007, p. 151); you see reports of “gender posers lurking on the Internet” and at best it's often considered geekish (Antunes, 1999). And, while it is most likely a hoax report, a recent story that a game vendor in China would be banning its male players who donned female roles (Greene, 2007) was all the more convincing because of the negative perceptions. As McCabe asserts, “what is interesting is not that so many gamers chose to play characters of another gender, but the surprised reaction such virtual experimentation produces”(McCabe, 2008).

Interestingly, this negative reaction to gender swapping arises partly from the belief that online relationships are more “true” and “pure” than appearance-influenced real-life relationships (Krotoski, 2005, p. 11; Lee & Hoadley, 2006, p. 383), thus increasing the sense of transgression --a sense of anger and of being used--when a person is discovered to be playing other than their “true self” (Curtis, 1997)--reflecting a common (though not universal) assumption about the primacy of gender in identity (Ouellette, 2006, p. 12).

Perhaps the negativity stems from the sensationalization of such activities by the media: “It's just the kind of thing that editors like: a hint of sex, a hint of weird geekiness, a chance to show sympathy for women and an excuse to show hot babes from Second Life.”(Bartle, 2008). And so I—or perhaps I should say Salmakis—spent the first few weeks mostly alone, wandering around and fending off one or two male advances. I found myself wondering at the motivations of almost every male-presenting avatar who spoke with me—much like the experience of Dibbell, who reports being “approached by male strangers apparently convinced that she had nothing better to do than supply them with the time of day and other, perhaps more stimulating varieties of data”(Dibbell, 2007, p. 143). In fact, even those with whom I'd already formed a male-male friendship with seemed slightly seedy



I shared my Salmakis avatar with a few female acquaintances, whose reactions Rouge, Louisiana, Februar



could be characterized as perplexed or even mildly troubled. I'm sure that was at least partly due to my somewhat cartoonish/fantasy attire. Not quite kombat lingerie, but hardly the girl next door, even though fantastic garb and bodies are a commonplace in SL. So I spent a little time on my wardrobe for a more "civilian" appearance, giving up the filmy naiad garb and dropping the dragonfly wings. After a while even she seemed a bit too "cute" to be realistic, so I created another shape and persona I called Nadia, more directly connected to the naiadish character from my short story. Nadia was less femme, more butch, though she still attracted the attention of men from time to time, especially when strolling around the beaches of Bora Bora or soaking in the hot tub there—this in spite of the rather desexualized bathing suit she wore.

In fact one of my most interesting experiences happened there. A male avatar approached and we began some rather innocuous conversation. After a few minutes he asked, point blank, my RL gender, and I told him. Completely unexpectedly, he 'fessed up to having a few female avatars of his own, and this led to a very rewarding conversation about gender play during which we shared (and critiqued) some of our opposite gendered creations, even joking about how "hot" some of them were. Even at this level, though, the feeling was that we were sharing parts of ourselves rather than, say, objects we had created or collected.

It's this very fluidity of apparent gender in SL (Bell, 2008) that I believe makes Queer Theory a good lens through which to examine gender-bending in these virtual environments. Queer Theory, which might be called an "anti-perspective," asserts that gender and indeed all identity is performative. Not "a performance" in the theatrical sense, but a bringing-to-form, a constitution, a creation that emerges from culture and ideology as well as material conditions. At the same time, Queer Theory actively "de-normalizes" essentialist notions of identity—whether of straight heterosexuality or institutionalized versions of gay or lesbian identity. In fact, it might be argued that a better label would be "Queering Theory," since it acts upon essentialist notions of identity and even of reality (Jagose, 1996)□. For the purposes of this inquiry, I take Queer Theory as a problematization or interrogation of several interrelated things: What is my real gender? When am I being true? What about me is real and not constructed?



And how do constructions (and denials of constructedness) serve to reproduce hegemonic ideologies rather than open up possibilities?

Queered identities, genders, and sexualities have been noted in the gaming and virtual-worlds environments for years. Some have seen the Lara Croft character from the popular Tomb Raider series as both butch and femme: hypersexualized but a powerful figure that the male player may identify with (Kennedy, 2002). Gender is, after all, an "unstable construct" (Ouellette, 2006, p. 2) despite many players' need to put their fellow players in to "conceptual pigeonholes of gender" (Dibbell, 2007, p. 126)□. While most games and online environments only provide binary gender selections, these can be worked around through presentation. In fact, such modifications and their fluidity can

support a fluid notion of virtual identity, changing things little by little, experimenting with various looks (and even race and gender), playing with representations of one's "real" self or a fantasy character, using various affinities to build different friendships, even using appearance for social activism." (Kafai, Fields, & Cook, 2007, p. 8)

□

Doubtless such experimentation in the graduality and multiplicity of identity is not lost in translation back to real life. In fact, as Jones argues, "Second Life is the ultimate 'rip, mix and burn' of reality which allows for the construction of postmodern, blended spaces and bodies."(Jones, 2006, p. 26)□--perhaps resulting in the kind of "polygendered omnisexuality" reported by one of Dibbell's (2007, p.143) informants.

(In fact Antunes makes the very good argument that "given their disinclination to follow many other 'common' social

trends, analyzing whether the role-player's gender is significant in performing a cross-gender role is a debate which, without further statistics, can only lead to argument" (Antunes, 1999)□. In other words, the gender-bending roleplayer is in some sense already queer, so how can one ask whether his or her portrayal is "accurate"?)

Geser describes a process of identity fragmentation or "guilding" that online environments encourage, "aiming a state when 'personality' is no longer concentrated on the physical individuals located at a single place, but distributed among many contexts where the individual is partially present with his voice, his writing or - like in SL - his avatar (Geser, 2007, p. 11).

Geser explains the way virtual worlds can "pinch off" a portion of an individual's identity into cyberspace where it takes on—at least in part because of its existence in a social space—a quasi-independent existence, though it still affects the "parent identity". Social norming reifies the existence of the virtual persona, and creates a need for commitment from the user/player. The strength of this "budded subjectivity" can threaten the very unity of the subjectivity that spawned it. Because of this danger, Geser says face-to-face interactions in the "real world" may become increasingly important if only because they can reinforce the idea of a stable and unified personality (Geser, 2007). One is reminded of the danger that "going into the light" (of a computer monitor?) holds for the earthly integrity of characters in the movie *Poltergeist*.



* * * * *

One of the most interesting conversations I've had with the "Pirates" was after someone brought up the idea that we might all be living in someone else's virtual reality experiment. This has actually been seriously proposed by a New Zealand scientist (Whitworth, 2008)□! Of course, religion and spirituality have long taught us to mistrust the reality of what we see, and it seems that the more we learn about quantum physics, the less "real" reality becomes. "Life is but a dream," as the old ditty goes, or as one researcher puts it, "virtual reality is the contemporary and future articulation of the philosophical and psychological question of how we define (and create) reality."(Jones, 2006, p. 4)□. Jones argues that--certainly from a postmodernist perspective--there are many "virtualities" in our lives and that

"virtual worlds rest within a discursive space that has been constructed upon the struggle between the strengthening and blurring of boundaries of corporeality and transcendence, the real and the virtual, where and nowhere, and the unitive and multiplicitous self. It is this tension that makes virtual reality and virtual worlds so compelling to the contemporary imagination"(Jones, 2006, p. 15).

He warns of the dangers that virtual, entirely constructed worlds could reify some of our worst kinds of fantasies (this makes me think of big hair and boobs one sees on the guys' female avatars, for some reason) but that it also allows us to create new and compelling worlds that are phenomenologically as real as "real life." "We are capable of experiencing it as a new reality, since what we call reality now is constructed by the senses alone" (Jones, 2006, p. 9).□

(No wonder I'm having strange dreams!)

What's more, the realities we call "virtual" can become the dwelling places of "embodied subjectivities" (my friend Rikki wrinkles her nose at phrases like this as "TFC" -- "too fucking cerebral"—but I like the beauty of a phrase that can contain

so much in a few syllables. I digress....). It's not really that difficult or strange a notion, though: "people have always invested emotionally in literary, film and television characters"(Kennedy, 2002). And in one study conducted in the virtual environment Second Life, the researchers found

. . . an indication that SL users display distinct spatial behavior when interacting with other users. In addition, in an automated experiment carried out by our bot [a scripted avatar not operated directly], we found that users, when their avatars were approached by our bot, tended to respond by moving their avatar, further indicating the significance of proxemics in SL (Friedman, Steed, & Slater, 2007).

□

This also makes me think of something I read by a fellow named Geser—but for the life of me I can't come up with the reference. It's an almost queasy feeling, to think that I might be a "budded subjectivity." But how would anyone know if they were?

* * * * *

After a while I decided to create an entirely separate user account for my female avatar so that I would eliminate confusion (both for me and my acquaintances). But about that time I became involved in some other SL-related projects involving environmental issues and instructional technology, and so "she" languished for several months. I just didn't have much motivation to inhabit her, to some extent because I had pretty much played out the "dressup" prospects. I didn't want to move around among men a lot, but I also figured women would catch on to my falseness almost immediately. This is consistent with Geser:

Given the full freedom to choose and shape one's own avatar, SL offers excellent conditions to experiment with alternative personal identities. However, there is evidence that in most cases, such experimentations take place only in at the beginning, while in the longer run, users find it too cumbersome (or uninteresting) to develop and maintain an identity that is radically different from that in Real Life"(Geser, 2007, p. 8).

However, I changed my mind after registering for a course in Gender Communication, because the readings there tremendously enhanced my curiosity about the experience of women. I decided I ought to put more effort into the avatar, and see how my virtual gender swapping worked out against the things I'd been reading.

First I gave her a completely anonymous and somewhat playful profile page—and have since learned that anonymous profiles are fairly common among women players as well, in order to protect them from the very real dangers of stalking. This anonymity, however, can contribute to a sense of duplicity since "in a virtual world one can slip out of a skin as if changing clothes."(Jones, 2006) even while separating RL and SL also supports the creation of a new and separate identity (McKeon & Wyche, 2005, p. 18)□ In fact, recent changes that allow the use of voice communication in SL are highly controversial and are already having a chilling effect on gender play in some contexts, since it's much easier to conceal gender if your voice is not present. (Geser, 2007, p. 9; Thompson, 2007)□. The ramifications go beyond gender "play" and also affect transgendered persons and even hearing-impaired users, whose real-life differences—once invisible in SL—now become a factor again!

After creating the profile, I got to work on the avatar itself.

* * * * *

[Itself?? It? Excuse me? I think I'll edit that part out—but then I guess it goes along with the whole idea that this fictional male character of mine thinks he's a real person playing with a virtual one, and not vice versa.]

* * * * *

Suzanne Mazzenga—who refers to her male avatar as a "manatar"--describes her manipulation of visual appearance in SL:

Rather than scrap the tortured artist I had created, I instead gave him a makeover. I widened the eyes, relaxed the facial lines, took away the initial jaw-heaviness and huge muscles, shortened the stature and thinned the body. I also gave him a little bit more of a smile around the corners of the mouth. Oh, and a Ghostbusters t-shirt and Chucks. :)(Mazzenga, 2007).

□

My wife—who is a regular SL user and who has both male and female avatars herself—critiqued my original Salmakis avatar as looking “like a weird boy,” so I worked at feminizing her. Surprisingly, my wife suggested larger breasts, and she took me shopping in-world—not only for clothing but for “skin” (which sets the skin tone and texture as well as a sort of permanent makeup, and even affects the character’s facial expression). She also helped me find a more lifelike replacement for the dreaded static “newbie hair” that stigmatizes one as a new player or—perhaps worse, to some—as an “augmentationist” who merely sees the avatar as his or her agent in the virtual space, and therefore spends much less time customizing its appearance than a committed immersionist, a true virtual inhabitant.



SL and virtual reality in general have come in for some heavy criticism due to their valorization of the visual—skin, hair, clothing—over other senses. Jones connects this with the Cartesian tradition in Western epistemology, whereby the eye becomes a metaphor for the mind, which, unlike the fallible, earthly body, can connect with objective truth (Jones, 2006, p. 6) Patin reminds us of the importance of this in political history, whereby “technologies of vision...serve to constitute and to reproduce the social arrangements of power” (Patin, 1999). SL may thus reproduce a denigration of the feminine, if it denigrates an embodied physicality that cannot exist in the supposed “pure mind” of online interaction (though it is not at all clear that such interactions are either pure or purely mental).

Due to the nature of the medium—especially as we have moved from text-based to graphical, 3-D virtual worlds—we must rely heavily on the projected image of those with whom we interact, and this reliance may enhance or valorize their gender or sexual identity (Nobel, 2006, p. 4)□; and “in a place where one’s outward appearance is completely malleable, such externalities can become even more significant than in the physical world“(McKeon & Wyche, 2005, p. 5)□. For good or ill, then,

Avatars display their ‘personality’ more exclusively by their visual appearance: their bodily characteristics as well as their clothing and accessories, Therefore, their appearance and traits are very crucial because they will usually remain constant during the interaction (Geser, 2007, p. 8)

In addition, some have pointed out that the default 3rd-person cinematic view distances the player and contributes to the objectification of the avatar (Ouellette, 2006, pp. 6-8, 9). Yet the “camera” can also be a tool of embodiment, because your avatar looks where the camera is aimed (McKeon & Wyche, 2005, p. 6)—including at the faces of those with whom you’re interacting. The effect of this gaze can be profound; even in my early days I sometimes felt as if my own avatar was looking at me and perhaps even judging me.

* * * * *

I’ll never forget that night I visited Greenville—the place that has since become my home—and accepted a balloon ride to tour the island.

I'd been there before but never really talked much with anyone, though I found the people there to be exceptionally friendly. Greenville is a model sustainable community, with a block of cohousing apartments that really lend a sense of connection. One of the women took me under her wing and convinced me to rent space there so I could be a part of the scene. Four of them share two apartments near mine, and we regularly get together for conversation and adventure. They're really some of the nicest people I've ever met—great sense of humor, very intelligent and spiritual, and one of them, Rikki, is a real pistol! She's got a bit of a quick temper but it most often comes to our defense especially when the “boys” get a little too personal or rowdy—she puts them in their place in a hurry, and it's an inspiration to the rest of us.

We tend to socialize among ourselves even though several of us have significant others. We just make time for each other and for the group. I guess some people would see our naval battles and balloon excursions as “not feminine” but these are definitely girls' outings! We have a tendency to get dolled up from time to time, but never anything more raunchy than you might see on a college campus and most certainly none of the “kombat lingerie” some of the men would love to see us wear. I have to agree with Kennedy when I hear those kinds of stereotypes. She says that the “hyperfeminine” look and behavior just lampoons itself and exposes the “constructedness of normality”:



male sexual desire and fantasy are always bound up in an image of femininity which is virtual (in the sense that it is not real). Femininity is thus finally exposed as an empty signifier, a sign without a referent (Kennedy, 2002).

□

I will confess to being physically attracted to a couple of the women. That's just who I am, really—I have always felt more attracted to women than men. That has led to a few complications, since SL has no shortage of soap-opera-esque drama. And there have been some very emotionally draining experiences; I've cried real tears over relationships already, though things are better now. I'd rather not go into details but the upshot is that I feel like I've made some genuinely close friends here in this virtual space.

Now I've just caught myself acting as if that dream about “virtual reality” is the truth! But at this point, what does it really matter? It's all constructed and performed, isn't it?

* * * * *

What has been the impact of my experiences inhabiting the emergent subjectivity of Salmakis—if she will permit me that conceit? For one thing, it's made me more aware of the extent to which I buy into the “bodacious babes” concept of idealized femininity. I simply enjoy dressing her up in short skirts and skimpy tops and waiting for the inevitable wolf-whistles (from both female and male players, I should note).

But that's not a solely male fantasy, and not something that must always be read in a patriarchal, counterfeminist way. And it's by no means the core of the experience.

I'm almost certain that I would never have been included into “The Pirates” as a man—most of the men we interact with are more like mascots, or perhaps sponsors, but not intimates. I can't say I've learned anything particularly new about the conversations of women-only groups from the experience, but that may just be that I'm starting from what I like to think is already a somewhat enlightened and aware standpoint.



Feeling the gaze of men—even electronic ones—is definitely a new experience for me and one I'll never forget. It's simply harder for Salmakis to ignore the presence of even the most benign of men—not as objects of desire, but as people who might have plans for me, people who might base their self-image on how I respond to them as potential love or sex partners. Furthermore, I don't know if I am reading too much into some situations, but I've certainly felt ignored or dismissed by some male-presenting avatars when talk turned to more serious matters. And I've been directly put down for “talking about things I really don't understand”—almost certainly because I was perceived as a woman.

Now that she exists, I am reluctant to let go of Salmakis. I wonder what will happen some day if I am “outed.” I've tried to approach the topic of gender play sidelong during conversations, to gauge potential reactions, and of course any close reader of my profile will see the potential in the name I've taken (some have already commented on it but no one has asked point-blank like that fellow did months ago—does that mean I'm performing more convincingly? I don't know). I do feel a kind of pride in “passing”—not just visually but socially. It would be hubris to think I've completely shaken off the patriarchal culture I swim in, but it's a sense of progress.

* * * * *

I've grown rather attached to my fictional “dream man”—that's an interesting turn of phrase, isn't it? I like to think that I could teach him a thing or two about being fully human. They say we're born with both genders in us, and that what happens is not so much the construction of male or female, but the destruction of what doesn't fit either of the mostly binary choices we have in my culture. It actually puts a lump in my throat to think of him sometimes—out there, bereft of his womanhood; a creature that had a little girl in his soul that was left out, exposed, to wither away. What could she have been? Who might she have been? He'll never really know, and no matter where his maleness takes him in this world he may be—even if only dimly—aware of that lost aspect of himself that is irrecoverable.

Or is it?

* * * * *

Second Life (and any virtual world) is by no means a utopian dream. It “still manifests significant aspects of the society (American, capitalist, gendered) from which it sprung and therefore is more reflective than transcendent”(Jones, 2006, p. 4)□. But it's real—or virtually so (virtual as in “practically indistinguishable from” or “almost”). A recent study found that people with attractive avatars were “more willing to talk about themselves, and move closer to other avatars, showing more open, self-confident and friendly” in the effects carried making.(N. Yee & Bailenson, 2007)□ The virtual and the real intermingle, queering our notions of reality and fracturing our constructed selves.



Clark
Life

Virtually Queer: Subjectivity Across Gender Boundaries in Second

Is this a road to madness or a path to transcendence?

What's next?

□

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