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Avatar Sex – the Joy of the Not-Real

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Abstract

The simulation of sex within social virtual worlds such as Second Life, distinct from any accompanying emotional intimacy which may exist between the avatars (via their operators in the actual world), is generally achieved by means of a pre-scripted animation in which two (or more) avatars participate, not unlike if the operators had chosen to have avatars participate in a pre-scripted animation of them dancing together.

Wardle (2015) used the Lacanian terminology of the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real to create a framework to typify the behavior and interaction of avatars; Symbolic avatars who behave in accordance with a pre-defined role, Imaginary avatars which serve as persona masks for the operator and Real avatars in which the complex mutually interactive relationship between operator and avatar leads to the emergence of an autonomous symbiotic unit.

This essay applies this terminology to examine the factors which have led to the simulation of sex becoming such a major element of avatar behavior within social virtual worlds such as Second Life.

1.   Introduction

The relationships that arise from virtual world interactions are varied and complex, both in terms of the relationships between individuals inhabiting those worlds via their avatars, and in terms of the relationship that the individual 'operator' within the actual world shares with the avatar they operate within the virtual world. In "Creating a Framework to Analyse the Perception of Selfhood in Artistic Practice within Second Life" (2015) I discussed the case for adopting the Lacanian terminology of the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real to create a framework to typify the behavior and interaction of avatars.

Given the important role that gender and sex can be seen to play within Second Life, this paper will seek to apply the framework of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real avatars created to examine the factors contributing to the popularity of virtual gender swapping and sexual interactions, and to categorize them in terms of the nature of the participant experience.

The three modalities by which avatars and behaviors will be typified are as follows:

- Symbolic avatars are defined as behaving in accordance with a pre-defined role, and as a part of a fixed imposed narrative, e.g., pre-defined gaming avatar or class, or avatar designed to perform a specific task. The avatar is often viewed by the operator as a proxy or extension of the operator to allow access to the virtual environment.

- Imaginary avatars represent the expression of the operator's self-perceived identity, that is to say - a representation of the way they imagine themselves to be, and which they regard as an extension or facet of themselves. They are typically stable self-customized avatar constructed by the operator and exhibiting chosen facets of operator persona. They act in accordance with expected social conventions, consciously constructing/performing the narrative with choices influencing the outcome of the performance.

- Real avatars demonstrate a complex mutually interactive relationship between operator and avatar, based neither on function nor on an aspect of operators identity, leading to the emergence of an autonomous symbiotic unit which inhabits-informs-compensates-transcends both. Their interactions with other avatars exhibit the potential for spontaneous independent expression of self within the confines of the virtual environment. The Real is that which is created when the imaginary is given existence, not in the symbolic actual but, moment by moment, by interaction and synthesis… whether within the realm of perception which we recognize as the actual, or those idealized virtual worlds in which we choose to be embodied.

Such typification does not mean that avatars should be viewed as strictly adhering to a single modality. Avatars may progress from one modality to another, e.g., new operators may utilize a generic avatar simply to access Second Life, and gradually, through experimentation, find themselves constructing and performing a stable identity which exhibits traits and behaviors of themselves. Some residents in Second Life have several alternative avatars, e.g., an Imaginary avatar which is carefully constructed and performed as a reflection of the operator's actual world self, a Symbolic avatar which they use to perform a particular task in Second Life, e.g., to trade in goods or services, and an alternative avatar (alt avatar) which they may use for experimental purposes or to protect the reputation of their main avatar within the virtual environment. The experience of the operator and avatar symbiotic unit which typifies the Real avatar is not one which can be anticipated, but which can emerge spontaneously and unexpectedly from interaction within Second Life, whether such catalytic interaction would typically be considered the symbolic adherence to a role or an imaginary constructed performance.

2.   Literature Review

At the time the research was conducted, Second Life had over 45 million total avatars registered and official estimates indicated above 50,000 residents were typically online at any given time (https://community.secondlife.com), though, periodic checks throughout the study showed between 37,000 and 40,000 residents were typically online at any one time (http://gridsurvey.com). Though this indicates a decline in popularity from its peak in 2009, where official estimates indicated 62,000 users online at any one time, Second Life continues to have a strong social community and remains a popular platform for the purpose of academic study of virtual worlds. Anna Peachey and Mark Childs write that "in recent years Second Life has provided a compelling environment for research, emerging as the most sophisticated of the social virtual worlds" (2011, p.2).

Within social virtual worlds such as Second Life, virtual gender swapping, or the tendency of operators within Second Life to assume a different expression of gender to that of their actual world identity, is well documented. Nick Yee (2006) found that men choose to inhabit virtual worlds as virtual women around a third of the time. Similarly, a 2007 survey by Global Markets found that 23% of residents said they played a different gender while research by Grosman (2010) found over eight in ten respondents (81.1%) had assumed a different gender within Second Life. Furthermore, sexually based activities account for a significant percentage of all Second Life social interactions. It is estimated that 20% of inhabited land within Second Life is used for 'sex and related activities' (wiki.secondlife.com, 2015).

Behavior towards other avatars in Second Life, whether sexual or otherwise, is usually predicated on the construction of Imaginary personas interacting within a consensually agreed upon virtual fantasy world. Therefore, before considering the nature of virtual world sexual interaction itself, it is important to position the discussion within the context of the identities, and in particular gender identities, which individuals construct/perform within virtual worlds.

In Second Life participants can present themselves, via their performance of their avatars, in any way they choose to. The careful construction of Imagined avatar appearance masks the operator's actual world identity, or rather allows the operator to choose which facets of it to display and to whom. Peachey and Childs write of the process of avatar construction within virtual worlds and the relevance to actual world identity: "We can challenge previous preconceptions; about gender, sexuality, physicality. We can redefine our roles in society or invent new ones."

Some years prior to the emergence of social virtual worlds such as Second Life, Judith Butler (1990) wrote of a willingness to imagine alternatively gendered worlds and asserted that "there is no reason to assume genders ought also to remain as two... if gender is constructed could it be constructed differently?" She quotes Wittig's Anti-Oedipus "For us there are not one or two sexes but many, as many sexes as there are individuals." Applying this to virtual worlds Castells (2010) writes of the 'elective' sexuality that virtual worlds allow and suggests that "the multiplicity of sexual expressions empowers the individual in the arduous (re)construction of her/his personality." It is interesting to note that both Butler and Castells refer to alternative gender identities as 'constructed' typifying them by the language used as Imaginary, rather than arising spontaneously from interaction with others.

Donald Jones (2007) wrote that the opportunity for gender experimentation offered within environments such as Second Life (SL) "can have real world impact, particularly for those who are in identity questioning and transition." He conducted interviews relating to avatars gender and sexual behavior and quotes from one respondent whose language suggests that they viewed such behavior as performative: "I simply enjoy to act in SL as a woman – while being male in Real Life (RL). Not being gay in RL and so not interested in sex with men. But in SL I enjoy having sex with men or women alike – always acting and behaving as a female."

Discussions of the expression of gender lead us to consider how this impacts the behavior, interactions and relationship of avatars within Second Life. Boellstorff (2008) gives examples of a man who, through role playing a woman in Second Life, became aware that (s)he was a transsexual, and another of a female in the actual world who manifests as a male cross dresser in Second Life. He further discusses the case a resident who was male in the actual world but whose avatar was female in Second Life: "I realised my avatar had the hots for a lesbian girl's avatar. I mean it, it wasn't me, I just realised it fitted the part" (2008). Such immersive performance of a constructed female identity in Second Life, viewed as separate from the operator, is a typical example of the Imaginary avatar modality performing a behavior narrative suggested by its construction. Tim Guest (2008) and James Wagner Au (2008) both write about the case of avatar Torley Torgeson who had a Second Life love affair with another female avatar Jade Lily. Though both avatars were female, they later discovered that in the physical world both operators of the avatars were men. Unperturbed, they continued the relationship, though elected to keep the virtual and actual separate and not to meet in the physical world. Jade Lily is quoted by Au: "He's an ideal partner for me, personality wise. What makes it romantic, I think… are the long conversations we have about who we are and where we fit into the world... I just treat him like a girl and he treats me that way."

However, while virtual worlds open up the possibilities for different expressions of gender, evidence does not suggest that gender identity, or identity in general, within virtual worlds is generally perceived as fluid. Yee et al. wrote that "the rules that govern our physical bodies in the real world have come to govern our embodied identities in the virtual world" (2007, p.15) in so far as, once constructed, avatar appearance and identity typically become relatively fixed and do not change in any significant way. Research by Koles and Nagy (2012) supports this position; they state that "the apparent consistency and stability in the established profiles may indicate that once individuals create their virtual selves, they prefer to keep the core elements of their identities constant, with relatively small amounts of variation."

Castranova (2006) focused on the implications of virtual world gender construction for the virtual sexual experience: "Sex in synthetic worlds is real… what is not real is the sense of being not like things in everyday life, is the fact that by switching avatars you can have sex in all four quadrants of the human pairings possibilities graph (M/F, F/M, M/M and F/F) with the same partner." Even Castronova's discussions are unnecessarily limiting, omitting to mention 'third gender' manifestations (hermaphrodite, etc.) which are estimated to account for 1% of all sex-themed places in Second Life (2015). Though rare, Second Life also has specialist areas where participants can have sex with a scripted object that look alive, e.g., alien, monster, ghost or animal. Cardenas (2010) imagines how Second Life will "facilitate the development of new identities which allow for (as yet) unimagined relations and relationships" while Boellstorff (2008)questions the nature of these possibilities asking "What theory of agency is in play when … a resident logs in two alts at once to have sex with herself."

The actual 'act' of sex within virtual worlds may be classified as a Symbolic undertaking, achieved by means of a pre-scripted animation in which two (or more) avatars participate, not unlike if the operators had chosen to have avatars participate in a pre-scripted animation symbolic of them dancing together. There is no inherent emotion within the animation, and little interactivity other than the activation of the avatar's participation within the animation by a click of the mouse on the activating 'animation ball.' Avatars simply become a part of the pre-scripted narrative of the animation and a means by which the operator can participate in the experience.

Laud Humphreys' "Tearoom Trade" (1975) studied men participating in impersonal acts of sex in public toilets, and noted that they provided an opportunity for men who publicly identified themselves as heterosexual to participate anonymously. Writing of venues that facilitated anonymous and impersonal sex between homosexual men, Michael Warner (1999) wrote that they brought about

the development of a "special kind of sociability where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy," Chris Ashford (2009) identified that both the act and the commission of the act of sex have been transformed by technology and unlike those in earlier studies, those seeking anonymous sex can now find it by turning to a computer rather than a cubical. However, while the act of anonymous sex between individuals in actual world may often be regarded as impersonal, and may or may not be considered lacking in emotional intimacy, the pre-scripted animation of Symbolic avatar sex also limited in its sensory aspects to the audio-visual. It is far removed from a visceral actuality of touch, smell of sweat and warmth of body and breath, which combine to enhance the physical sexual experience within the actual world. Nonetheless, those participating in such activity describe a thrill that transcends the limited nature of the interaction, the resultant rush of emotions able to trigger the experience of the Real. Shaowen and Jeffrey Bardzell (2006) wrote about the experience of BDSM within Second Life (i.e., bondage, domination, sadomasochism, wherein avatars willingly slave themselves to 'masters/mistresses' often in 'dungeon' surroundings.) Second Life BDSM activity uses computer scripts to allow one operator to relinquish partial control of their avatar to another, effectively allowing one avatar to 'dominate' the other in-world. They recorded that, "the first time one's avatar is caged or chained by another... there is a shock and a thrill. The emotions are that quality that gives an experience value, coloring the experience and shaping its meanings, its value; emotions are not independent entities or states disconnected from experience."

3.   Methodology

Between March 2012 and August 2013 I carried out research to investigate the nature and stability of expression of identity characteristics and behavior within Second Life. Though the focus of this research was not exclusively related to gender identity and sexual behavior within Second Life, many of the findings provided insight into these areas. Following the example of Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor, who wrote that it is accepted practice for ethnographers to "collect quantitative data themselves, such as administering a survey or census at the outset of a research project" (2012, p.127), I employed an initial questionnaire to define broad patterns of behavior, to be followed by more detailed interviews to determine the typical relationships and expressions of identity which operators manifest when using their avatars. This questionnaire was designed to ascertain the extent to which existing Second Life residents follow actual world paradigms in their virtual world relationships via their avatars, and to obtain data to inform the direction of further research. It was decided that, during the initial stages of research, no other actual world demographic data would be collected during the initial stage to keep the questionnaire as short as possible, to maximize response and keep the focus on the manifest identity of the avatar rather than the actual world operator.

A six-month minimum residency in Second Life was used as a qualifying factor for the questionnaire. This followed the protocols used in a similar study by Gilbert, Fossa and Murphy (2011, p.226) investigating the use of alternative avatars for role-playing and/or experimentation purposes. This "minimal residency requirement" ensured that all data were derived from at least moderately experienced operators, technically competent at avatar modification, as opposed to newcomers with unstable patterns of behavior. The length of residency was deemed particularly important in light of findings from previous researchers that Second Life operators undergo a phase of experimentation before settling into more stable patterns of usage (Warburton, 2008) and, after a period of time, 'avatars more closely resembled the real person' (Bradshaw, 2006).

Within Second Life the demographics of the operators, and their similarities and differences, can be difficult to determine and the limited active population of Second Life often necessitates that researchers adopt a non-probability or 'convenience' approach to sampling. Denscombe discusses 'Cluster Sampling' of which he writes "in reality, it is possible to get a good enough sample by focussing on naturally occurring clusters of the particular thing that the researcher wishes to study"

(2005, p. 37). With this in mind it was determined to attempt to obtain respondents from a variety of 'clusters' within Second Life, by making contact with potential respondents using a variety of techniques at various virtual locations, and at a variety of times of day with particular emphasis on different types of resident as defined by areas in which they congregate. Areas within Second Life were required to have enough active population or traffic to be able to recruit sufficient research participants, and thus clusters were found within academic areas including the University of Salford Metaverse and the Virtual Tech Museum, social areas such as virtual London, social areas such as Nightclubs, etc. Data was collected by placing interactive screens linked to a Survey Monkey questionnaire in a wide variety of locations and placing links to the in-world SLURLs in relevant web forums (such as the Tech Virtual exhibition forum). Individual avatars were also canvassed directly within Second Life by a personal approach from the researcher's avatar accompanied by a floating screen linking to the questionnaire. To minimize any incidence of respondents completing the questionnaire multiple times the Survey Monkey site was set to only accept one response per IP address. Over a period of three weeks, the questionnaire collected 114 valid responses and the initial findings reviewed to help determine the direction of the future research.

Upon completion of the initial study, follow up interviews were conducted over a period of 18 months between March 2012 and August 2013 to gain additional information. These focussed on the operator experience during the avatar development process and the effect this process has on the relationship between the operator and avatar. At this stage the gender identity of the operator was ascertained to enable the interviews to properly investigate how operator relationships with avatars evolve over time with particular consideration of identity liminal events, i.e. significant events in the development of the avatars identity which may be seen as catalytic to change within the relationship between the operator and their avatar. Thirty-seven participants were recruited from individuals who had responded to the original questionnaire, and all were regular users of Second Life, defined as visited more than twice per week. The group comprized eight female participants and twenty-nine males; twenty-one, including four females, were 'longer-term' Second Life residents, i.e., those with more than eighteen months residency at time of interview, and sixteen, again including four females, were 'medium-term' residents, i.e., with six to eighteen months residency at time of interview. While the longer-term residents were able to provide interview evidence detailing changes in behavior taking place over a longer period, the medium-term residents could provide more recent, and in many cases highly detailed, recollections of the events which led to behavioral changes in the earliest period of their residency. Once respondents agreed to participate, they were contacted asking them to initially set aside a specific hour for the interviews to take place and advized of the structure and topics that the interviews would include. The interviews took place within Second Life and used text rather than voice communication so as to keep the focus on the development of the avatar's expression of identity rather than the identity of the operator, though these further discussions did make reference to the gender and age demographics of the operator, to allow comparison to be made with the manifest identity of the avatar. Text-based communication also offered the advantage of allowing the data to be easily collected rather than having to make transcripts of voice recordings. The interviews were designed as semi-structured in nature with broad categories of questions to be adhered to, allowing responses to be grouped by categories, but with the flexibility to bespoke or add questions prior to, or during, the interview, to further investigate the responses of specific operators and to allow the discussions to develop according to these responses. Though it was initially anticipated that sufficient data would be collected by interviews lasting an hour, some exchanges took significantly longer. All participants were however happy to continue the interviews to their conclusion either at the time of first interview, or in some cases by scheduling additional interview slots.

The data collected from the interviews were systematically coded to allow for thematic analysis. Categories relating to the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real classifications were applied

retroductively to the data where avatar behavior or expression of identity described fit into these modalities. Participants were asked to discuss factors and choices influencing the appearance of their avatar, and further themes were applied to categorize the topic of the elements discussed which included the avatar's purpose, choice of gender, stability of appearance, narrative, and experience of embodiment.

4.   Findings

Two of the questions asked yielded particularly significant results. The first related to the frequency of change of appearance. Taken alone the responses to this question would seem to suggest a high level of fluidity of appearance with over half the respondents indicating that they changed appearance frequently/very frequently and no respondents indicating that they never changed appearance.

Table 1: Frequency of change of avatar appearance

Frequency	Responses	Percentage
Very frequently (almost every visit)	36	31.6%
Frequently (once every few visits)	23	20.2%
Occasionally	23	20.2%
Very infrequently (only on special occasions)	32	28.1%
Never	0	0%

The significance of the fact that no respondents indicated that they have never made changes to their avatar appearance must not be underestimated. While in many game environments operators may initially modify their avatar appearance, it is not common practice to continue to do so on a regular basis. Even in games with both ludic and social aspects, such as World of Warcraft, it is uncommon for operators to significantly change the appearance of their avatar other than in exceptional circumstances relating to the narrative. This response may, therefore, suggest the development of a significantly different relationship between operators and avatars than that manifest within virtual 'game' environments, in so far as avatars are viewed less as symbolic fixed representations of a static role, but more as mutable entities, representing either different facets of a stable yet changeable Imaginary and constructed self, or undergoing constant fluid change in response to Real interaction. While the response to the question might be attributed to the ease with which avatar appearance can be changed within Second Life compared to other virtual environments, this flexibility to modify appearance within Second Life might similarly be viewed as catalytic in the paradigm shift in the nature of operator/avatar relationship.

The second significant response related to the aspects of the appearance of their avatar that were changed. It can be observed that these results seem relatively consistent with what one might expect in terms of changes individuals may make to their expression of identity within the actual world. 97.4% of participants said that they changed their avatar clothes with one adding a comment that they had to keep their avatar looking presentable; however, only six of the participants said that they ever changed the gender of their avatar.

Table 2: Aspects of appearance changed

Aspect Changed	Responses	Percentage
Clothes	111	97.4%
Hair	76	66.7%
Body Shape	23	20.2%
Gender	6	5.3%

The findings in Table 1 that only 5.3% of respondents said that their avatar ever changed appearance of gender may initially appear to conflict with findings relating to the frequency of avatars manifesting a different gender to that of the actual world operator. It must be remembered, however, that these initial findings did not consider the operator's actual world expression of gender, or whether or not the operator has more than one avatar with which to represent different identities, but rather the fluidity of gender appearance for an individual avatar. Accordingly, the findings are not in conflict with those of other researchers who have found that once established, core elements of avatar identity generally remain constant (Koles and Nagy, 2012) and adhere to "the rules that govern our physical bodies in the real world" (Yee et al., 2007).

During the follow-up interviews, when questioned about the stability of avatar appearance, both longer-term and medium-term resident participants concurred that social bonds played a large part in the decision to maintain a stability of avatar appearance. The following response was typical: "All my friends in Second Life know me by my avatar's appearance so I don't see myself changing it." It is the data collected relating to the expression of the gender which is of most significance to the topic of this paper. Not only was changing the expression of the gender of an individual avatar uncommon amongst the participants, but the incidence of participants operating avatars of a different gender to that of the actual world operator was less frequent than expected. Some participants rejected the idea of gender experimentation completely. One operator stated "I don't feel the urge to explore the other sex or how people might interact with me based on it" while another remarked: "my sex is fixed and is not likely to change; my avatar is female because I am female." Avatar gender choice was generally a conscious decision made by the operator and operators who were female in the actual world exhibited a greater willingness to engage in detailed discussions of these choices.

One of the females interviewed discussed how "Playing a male is very complicated. You have to get past the jock/pretty boy/not a jock thing. It seems to scar males for life, and it affects male avatars too. Also, males have detachable penises. You have to buy one and then figure out the whole etiquette for wearing it." This suggests, at least in that participant's view, that a male avatar can only truly regarded to be a male if exhibiting, or at least possessing, actual world male physicality, i.e. even an Imaginary constructed avatar must be constructed with a penis to fulfill the criteria necessary to be regarded as male. However, it must be noted that while the Imagined sex of an avatar may be specified by its construction which gives rise to a different menu selection criteria, every avatar is actually created sexless insofar as it originally has no genitalia, and that a penis, like clothes or hairstyles, can be added as an accessory to either perceived sex.

Female operators within the medium-term residency group exhibited a tendency towards being more experimental with their expression of self via their avatars, although this would need more in-depth research to verify. One such participant chose to create a roboticized avatar, Tyrell_Kaineus, drawing the name from a combination of a transgendered character from Greek myth and a corporation from a Philip K. Dick novel. Tyrell's operator discussed how she had originally considered male and female human appearing possibilities, but became 'enchanted' by the idea of a

robot avatar. However, she felt that she still needed the avatar to remain anthropomorphic and humanoid in appearance, and decided that it would be easier for others to interact with her if the avatar had gendered characteristics. She, therefore, decided that the avatar should be female in appearance, stating her reasons as follows: "I know how people tend to behave around females and how females act. And if I was going to be female, I decided to be ultra-female, so the avatar had curves, breasts, even a pony tail, and heels. The proportions were also female for example, the shape of the face, the size of the arms and shoulders were definitely feminine even if the combination of seven foot tall and hourglass figure is rarely seen in real life."

She went on to discuss her reasons for choosing the robotic appearance: "I am not sure if I actually want to be a robot but the idea of being difficult to damage and ageless appealed to me. It also seemed appropriate to me to be an artificial life form to interact within an artificial world. I chose the pink colour to resemble skin, again a juxtaposition for a robot, and to enhance its femininity."
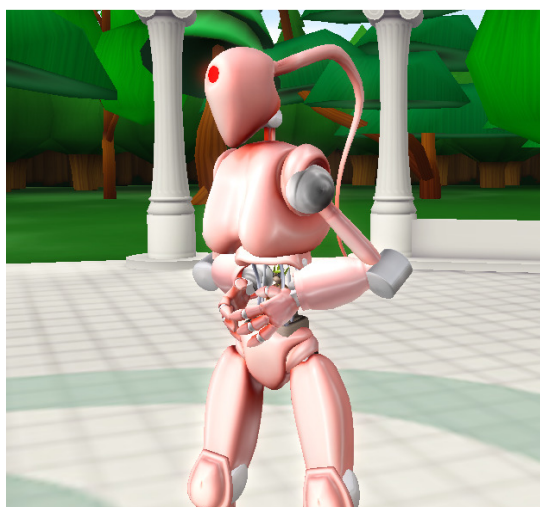
A second medium-term residency female participant, ZarinaB, described herself as an avid game player and explained her choice of female avatar: "It's not that I don't like playing male characters, I just prefer being females." An analysis of the language used, in this statement and in other areas of the interview, indicates that in discussing assuming male roles in games she referred to 'playing male characters.' This may suggest performing a Symbolic role or pre-defined narrative. When referring to female avatars her language was much more personal, i.e., 'being' females. This, perhaps unconscious, distinction between 'playing' or performing a role and 'being' the avatar shows a progression not only from the Symbolic to the Imaginary, but also perhaps indicative of a move towards the experiential nature of a Real avatar.

A third medium-term residency participant described how she wanted her avatar, Sikander Hoxley, to be androgynous, so far as possible, without the appearance of a specific age or particular racial characteristics: "I spend a great deal of time thinking about identity and gender and feel quite androgynous. I don't particularly like to be identified as a woman. I chose to base Sikander on a male avatar form as if I'm going to go for something that differs from the way I'm popularly perceived by others then I may as well pick something all the way out and work backwards. I'm short, big hips, big breasts, so Sikander is physically very different from me, I was trying to create a body that, were it to exist in real life, I'd like to be. I think of Sikander as gay, because I sometimes feel myself to be a gay man trapped in a woman's body. I want him to project an air of confidence when talking to others, a character I would feel comfortable walking around in."

One participant related how he had allowed his five year old daughter to join in when he was in Second Life and how she had pestered him to create a female avatar for her to operate under his supervision. The suggestion that the avatar had to not only be a female but had to have been designed to be a female, had come from his daughter; when he had offered to allow her to operate his male avatar she had requested he make a 'girl one' and when he had offered to make his existing avatar female for her to operate she had responded "don't be silly, she'd still be a man really." The participant went on to relate how, when he had created a new female avatar, his daughter loved to take it shopping and dress it up in 'princess outfits.' This not only exemplifies the societal stereotyping of fixed gender identity at a young age but also reveals an innate tendency to view the gender of an avatar as fixed in its original state regardless of any subsequent variation in its gender appearance. Comparisons may be made to the generally narrow view of transgender individuals taken by many people in contemporary society who exhibit the tendency to view an individual's gender as fixed and relatable to their physical gender at birth, rather than a personal expression of gender chosen by them.

One longer-term resident interviewed was very regularly active in Second Life, visiting for several hours each day. She was known to her Second Life friends only via her avatar, presenting herself as an extremely chatty, helpful and often flirty young female. Her avatar dresses in colorful summery dresses and flitters around on shimmering moth wings, often to be found in Second Life reception areas helping new residents become familiar with the operating system. She chatted at length in-world about how she had made a role for herself within Second Life and felt that the purpose of her being there was to help others settle in. Conversation flowed easily and she related enthusiastically how she had made many close and lasting friends within Second Life. Though she gave no details of her actual world identity, she discussed how Second Life was an outlet for her true expression of self, an expression not of her actual world self but of a different, yet equally valid identity, that she believed to be more authentic.

Several months later when I met this avatar's operator at an actual world event, I was surprised, not to find that she was a pre-operative transsexual, but that she was so extremely shy that for the duration of the event she stood on the outer edge of any activity and even when I attempted to engage her in conversation she avoided eye contact and spoke as little as possible. When I subsequently met her avatar again in Second Life she exhibited her characteristic chatty self. Although we did not discuss our actual world meeting further, I got a clear impression that her Second Life avatar allows her to interact with others in a far more spontaneous, meaningful and real way within a social context than she felt comfortable doing within the actual world.

Within the series of interviews conducted, nineteen of the participants (over 50%) spontaneously discussed having visited sexually themed areas within Second Life at some time during the development of their avatar, and many indicated that these were liminal events, i.e., events that had an impact on the development of their avatar. These discussions were flagged as a secondary theme relating to gender identity when categorizing the information. It is interesting to note that of these nineteen, sixteen were 'longer-term' Second Life residents. It may be speculated that this suggests a relationship between the time spent in Second Life and the willingness/confidence to discuss more personal aspects of one's behavior within the platform, though this hypothesis was not further explored. All were male, and while it may be theorised that males are more likely to visit sexually themed areas, or more likely to openly admit to this, the lack of females in this group may simply be attributed to the fact that males made up almost 80% of the participants interviewed. The following comments are drawn from interviews with these longer-term residents.

One participant interviewed discussed using an alternative avatar to 'explore a darker side of his personality' within the BDSM areas in Second Life, where he would not be comfortable using his primary avatar which resembled his physical appearance in the actual world, and could be linked by

appearance and name to his actual world self. He also stated that he felt a dark-skinned tall musclebound avatar would allow him to fit in more easily, both into the areas and to the role for which it was designed. Although he had no involvement with the actual world BDSM scene, he stumbled upon a BDSM location early in the development stages of his main Second Life avatar. Although he had been too embarrassed to remain there, teleporting away within a few seconds of arriving, his curiosity had been such that he created his new alt avatar to allow experimentation within areas he considered to be taboo. Although little in Second Life is taboo, behavior and social interaction are dictated very much by social conventions of a particular area and its residents, and of the preferences and prejudices of those operating the avatars. The new avatar represented a new symbolic role which the operator performed with such confident that he soon won the trust of others and became a regular part of the Second Life BDSM scene. While the new avatar always assumed the dominant role with other avatars, the operator discussed how he had naturally assumed this role, not out of any preference, but as a result of his avatar's physical appearance. He occasionally considered taking a submissive role but felt that this would not be possible using the same avatar and would necessitate him creating yet another alt avatar to facilitate this. This supports the assertion that once avatar identity has been developed, it quickly becomes fixed. When asked whether his experience within Second Life had led him to consider experimenting with the actual world BDSM scene he responded that he had never felt the urge to do so, even though it was an experience he realized he enjoyed when participating within Second Life. He likened it to enjoying playing Call of Duty but not actually wanting to experience war first-hand. He clarified that the enjoyment from Call of Duty was derived very much from playing the game: "it's an adrenalin rush but you don't feel terrified as though you are actually in a battle zone. The first few times (in the BDSM scene) in Second Life I was genuinely scared, it's all about a real experience with real people." He laughingly added "So no, I wouldn't want to go to a BDSM club… unless I could go there looking hot like my avatar."

Similarly, another interviewee described how he had created an alt avatar using a generic male avatar to experience sex-related areas within Second Life. He had visited a sexually themed beach where he had participated in his first avatar sexual experience using animation balls. "It seemed really intense, my heart was racing." He went on to discuss returning to the same beach on a second occasion but now, trying to replicate the original experience had seemed "seedy and fake. The first time around I'd been carried away by the experience but once the novelty had worn off, the animation balls just felt like a game mechanism." While the first visit demonstrated the qualities of a spontaneous, authentic, Real avatar interaction, in which there had been a visceral response, this depth of response was lacking when an attempt was made to symbolically re-enact the spontaneous Real from the Imaginary memory of the past event. The interviewee continued: "I'm sure places like that exist in the real world but I'd be too embarrassed to search them out. In Second Life that kind of thing seemed perfectly acceptable, it was safe and everyone was doing it. Nobody cared or wanted your phone number afterwards." These feelings that the act was both acceptable and anonymous may have contributed to the experience, or at least made the operator more likely to participate in it.

A third interviewee also found it easier to break societal or self-imposed taboos within Second Life. During one of his early visits to Second Life, he had searched for the type of rock music club he frequented in the actual world. Instead, he found himself in a Second Life lap dancing club complete with near naked pole dancing avatars. He discussed how he had never considered going to such a place in the actual world and could only envisage himself doing so if pressured to do so by peers on an occasion such as a stag-party; even then he "would have to have had a few beers to get the courage to go in." He admitted, however, to enjoying spending time in the Second Life club and recounted how he had found that simply "observing what was going on and the interactions between the pole dancers and customers an interesting experience." Boellstorff encountered a similar incident and observed that male avatars engaged in normative 'stag night' behavior in a Second Life club

without any apparent concern that the women dancing in the bar might be men in the actual world… "what mattered was that male and female acted as heuristically stable referents for online selfhood."

Although participants within virtual worlds are aware that, in most cases, the Imaginary avatar with whom they interact may be no more than the performance of an entirely constructed entity, controlled by an anonymous operator with whom they have no direct interaction, and of whose identity they have no reliable indicators, this truth is largely ignored and has little impact on avatar interactions in Second Life. Lesley Procter (2015) argues that such online anonymity can actually "increase intimacy and closeness, helping to circumvent the usual obstacles to relationship development." The experience of the Real may not always be a welcome one, nor is it always beneficial in the development of relationships. Just as factors such as makeup and perfume are used to enhance the construction of identity in the actual world and to attract partners by obscuring natural scent or perceived flaws in appearance, the absence of sensorial factors, whether jasmine or sweat, within Second Life, may similarly help circumvent such obstacles. Limitation of the senses to the audio-visual, by distancing the participant from the experience of the actual world, may actually enhance the constructed experience in which the operators/ avatars participate; a sexual interaction becomes entirely one of role play, a perfectly constructed Imaginary performance, without the possibility of intrusion by an unwanted actual.

During the interviews I conducted, avatar experience was frequently described as having a direct impact on the operator's actual world emotional state, particularly by longer-term residents who had expressed strong experiential identification between their actual-world identity and that of their avatar. One participant, and longer-term Second Life resident, described how her avatar sometimes impacted on her actual world emotional state: "She gets so emotional that sometimes it makes me cry too." Such emotional responses are typical of the "visceral empathy" described by Au (2008), and it is in such responses that the manifestation of the Real avatar modality may be observed. They are viewed by the operator as a real spontaneous reaction on the part of the avatar, flowing from the avatar to the operator, rather than described as being an actual world response by the operator resulting in an imaginary performance by the avatar, e.g., "I get so emotional that sometimes I cry, and I reflect that in the way I act via my avatar."

5.   Conclusion

As demonstrated by many of the examples discussed, operators, via their avatars, can display a tendency to interact in ways (sexual or otherwise) within the different social framing of Second Life which they may never consider within the actual world. For some, the attraction of sexual experiences within Second Life arises from the Imaginary, i.e., the ability to carefully construct, control, and perform the interaction and behavior of their avatar. In the case of the BDSM scene, this extends further to the ability to exert that control on the avatars of others, or to devolve the responsibility for the construction of the interaction to another by becoming a willing performer in an imaginary interaction constructed by another. For others, whether using Imaginary avatars carefully constructed to present specific facets of the operator's self, or generic avatars acting only as symbolic placeholders for their operator's in Second Life, the attraction lies not in the adherence to a carefully constructed narrative, but rather in the thrill of breaking it. Unexpected emotional responses to an event or social interaction within Second Life demonstrate the manifestation of real experience.

The research conducted does not claim to provide conclusive findings, but rather seeks to stimulate further research and discussion into important areas of avatar behavior such as sexual behavior, intimacy and emotion which remains relatively unexplored. As in the actual world, though a developed intimacy does not always precede a sexual interaction, such intimacy may arise spontaneously from such interaction. Where this is accompanied by the emergence of a shared Real, it may go on to shape the nature of future interactions between those involved whether these are

defined by the boundaries of Second Life, or are allowed to impact on the actual world lives of the operators.

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