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## **Avatars in *Second Life*: Creating a Persona in a Virtual World**

Digital media, especially the Internet or media making use of the Internet as infrastructure, are often said to offer new means for creation, communication, and interaction. As new media theorists like Donna J. Haraway, Sherry Turkle, and Scott Bukatman have shown, new media can help renegotiate identity and provide a new platform for expansion, exploration and experimenting for the individual, which can be perceived as destabilizing, empowering and/or exhilarating.

The kind of media I am focussing on in this paper is an online 3D world, *Second Life (SL)*, which was created by Linden Labs in San Fransisco. *SL* has grown rapidly—from 70.000 residents a year ago to almost 1,000,000 today (mid October 2006). In *SL* every resident can walk or fly around, teleport, buy and sell land or objects, create and explore. The resident is of course, strictly speaking, an avatar, a real life person's (or group's) representative or extension in the online world.<sup>1</sup> The avatar, and the notion of the virtual, has been seen as one of the most important means for experimenting with identity, and one of the benefits of a virtual world: "In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along" (Turkle 10).

That is very much the case in *Second Life* as well. Avatars are not new – they have been a distinct feature o role-playing games for a long time. *Second Life* is nevertheless different from games like *World of Warcraft*, *Everquest* and *EVE online*, that usually are more homogenous and have game guides advising players how to play the game: "Players assume the roles of *Warcraft* heroes as they explore, adventure, and quest across a vast world," and a clear, often goal-oriented, game narrative and a visual environment has to be taken into account when creating an avatar or playing the game.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the *Merriam-Webster* definition: "an electronic image that represents and is manipulated by a computer user (as in a computer game)."

As a part of their strategy, Linden Labs has chosen not to restrict the resident in any of those ways. *Second Life* does not have a narrative, the avatars are "infinitely customizable" (Linden Lab) and the environment can be altered in almost any way a landowner chooses to: "*Second Life* is a 3D online digital world imagined, created and owned by its residents" (*Second Life*). In an article for *The Economist*, the Linden Lab founder, Philip Rosedale says: "*Second Life* ... was designed from inception for a much deeper level of participation" and this is true especially from a creative and property rights point of view.

The article in *The Economist* points to how *Second Life* is and can be used in a number of ways. The underlying idea is that it would be possible to do anything and everything in a world this free, and that its residents, when given these opportunities, will take full advantage of this and create something better than real life. But what do the residents do when they are free to be whoever they choose to be? I would argue that the construction of avatars very much resembles how characters in literary works – which might show resemblance to what we define as virtual worlds today – are shaped, and that the characteristics chosen in fact reveal genre bound tendencies.

The data I will analyse in this paper is taken from profiles, which each resident has the opportunity to create for his or her avatar in *SL*. The basic information is there from the beginning: the name of the residents and when they were "born," that is the date the *SL* account was created. The residents can then choose to add an image or text about themselves or anything they think is interesting or important. It is possible to add links to places of interest, show other people their own world, show who they are "married to" online, or advertise their own projects. It is also possible to post a photo and/or write about their real life selves.

The names of the avatars I have looked at come from a visit counter I have set up outside my shop (where I sell houses and furniture I build in *SL*). It registers anyone within 10 metres with name and the exact time when they were there. For a week in late September and early October 2006 it registered 106 names. 41 of them had fairly detailed profiles and those are the avatars I have focussed on in this paper.

The profiles clearly show that the residents have different aims and focus online. Some list their favourite hangouts, others state their sexual preferences, some focus on their skills as builders, designers or programmers, others are open to meeting new people while some rather wish to be left alone or only associating with their close friends or inworld "family." But even though the 41 profiles display all these different interests and focus, most of the presentations are written in what can be categorized as literary genres: romance, fantasy and realism.

The first group consists of profiles clearly expressing the profile author's affection for his or her partner. There are clear parallels to the classic romance genre in terms of the language they use: "He enveloped me with his warmth and wrapped it around me and totally captured my heart. I love you Val" (Lexxy) or "First and foremost, my heart, my love, and all of who I am, is, and always will be, the property of my love, Jennie" (Bob). The examples above might seem excessively high-flown, but they are typical for many of the profiles. It seems as if *SL* here becomes a platform for residents to experiment with an idealized notion of love, at the same time they establish themselves as both the giver and receiver of that kind of romantic love. Both female and male avatars use this type of romance genre rhetoric.

The visual aspect is significant as well. Remarkably many of both the male and female avatars in this category have long blonde hair and blue eyes, which parallels the images of the traditional fairytale prince and his princess – or Barbie and Ken. There are examples of more down to earth versions, however, like the following two, where the profile authors say that they are a couple offline as well: "Here in *SL* with the man of my dreams ... I'd follow you anywhere either in game or in rl, I love you with all I am" says Sin and in her partner Rick's profile we can read: "I am freindly (sic!) a somewhat flirt but Sin is my one and only love so dont take flirting beyond flirting." The creation of this type of narrative does not seem to be self-reflexive. There are few examples of self-reflective writing or more ironic twists in this particular category. I have found only one text, which lapses into irony: "On this date 02/18/06 5,30 PM *SL* Time I was made the Happiest person in the world!!!! :D Even if I did fall asleep:P Thank You! Dragonlord :D" (Stormy).

Even though I have found plenty of examples of the romance genre in *Second Life*, it is nevertheless not the genre most associated with a computer game (which *SL* sometimes, rightly or wrongly, is classified as). Most people would probably draw parallels to the fantasy, action or science fiction<sup>2</sup> genres instead, and even though not many residents dress up as Frodo, Princess Leia or James Bond, the role-playing aspect is clearly visible in *Second Life*. From medieval castles, knights and dragons, to space shuttles and a Star Trek galaxy, to combat sites, guns and samurai swords. What is important for many of the residents is that *SL* becomes an arena for experimenting, of "trying things out," without any negative repercussions. The role-playing is not necessarily linked to fantasy worlds, though: Andover, whose avatar is a man in kilt, is very clear about what he wants inworld: "I'm interested in meeting new friends, exploring, being someone I'm not in RL (uninhibited, sex maniac, RPer), building on things I am in RL (romantic, intellectual, flirt, philosopher) and not being some

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<sup>2</sup> Which of course are three separate genres, but I choose to address all of them together in this context, since I would argue that they provide material for character formation and role-play in similar ways.

things I am in RL (you guess).” Andover has a very clear perception of himself as a player, of himself creating – and living – a fantasy in *Second Life*, and he actualizes the need for setting up rules for role-play. As Scott Bukatman says: ”It is increasingly evident that society, even more defined by a system of electronic representations, is based on an accepted fiction, or a ‘consensual hallucination,’ to use William Gibson’s definition of cyberspace” (30). In order for something to be consensual, agreed upon by more people than one, rules have to be negotiated and spelled out.

The third genre, realism, is in many ways the opposite of the genres described above. The residents belonging to this group often blur the boundary between online and offline. There are couples, like Sin and Rick, who are partners in both ”worlds,” there are people who do not make, or claim not to make, any distinctions between the avatar and them as persons in their profile, like Yah who, almost biography-like, tells us that he ”waited for 3 weeks for a new password is a writer on the team of ”theKONSTRUKT”. His first article is due to be published soon. A keen member of FILMANIACS he is constantly searching for a new subject to feature.”

Other residents write the same things in both the avatar profile and the ”first life profile” like Abbaca does: He is an ”electronic musician, artist, graphic designer, and video enthusiast.” LL (the person behind does not want her avatar’s first name in this paper) does the same in a visual way: Her profile features an image of her almost naked avatar and her offline self is presented with a similar photo. Under her picks tab, which lists her favourite places, it becomes clear that she belongs to the BDSM subculture in *Second Life*, which further underlines her focus.

Some of the residents, like onyx or SuluMor, actually volunteer more information about their life offline than they do about their life in *SL*. onyx shows real life pictures of herself and her sons, one of them a US soldier in Iraq. SuluMor writes: ”Two cats...Romulus and Remus (mainecoon wannabes), work with disabled, Live in Michigan, gooseberry, I live to build...I build to live.”

Quite a few of the residents give information about their age and/or real location in their profiles, sometimes even photos, but there is of course no possibility to verify whether this information is true, but, on the other hand, it indicates how they wish to be perceived by the other residents in *Second Life*.

There are also examples of politicians, artists or writers who enter *SL* to perform, give speeches or interviews. *The Economist* gives the example of Mark Warner, former governor of Virginia, who discussed ”Iraq and other issues” inworld. Quite a few residents are doing business inworld and their profiles can be said to belong in the realism genre group. They mainly advertise their products or services, often giving very little information about themselves on or offline. None of these residents seem to be interested in role-playing per se, and, with a few exceptions, their avatars usually look more

”normal” as well. Basically, some residents seem to enter *Second Life* as themselves and use *SL* as a giant 3D chat-room or an area full of potential voters, customers or clients.

The tension between residents who view *Second Life* primarily as scene for role-playing (as exemplified by the first two genres) and those who prefer to enter it as themselves (the ”realists”) is quite conspicuous. The reaction from the latter is not as visible as the reaction from the role-players; there are quite a few examples of role-players fighting for their right to live the *SL* fantasy of their choice. ”[L]ets just enjoy *SL* and have fun – and keep the first life where it’s supposed to be, shall we?” is a fairly common comment. Kali makes an even stronger comment: ”RL? Yep, I’ve got one. Anything else you wanna know? I’ll tell you ... but only if \*I\* think you need to know .... *SL* is *SL*, RL is RL. Plain and simple. If you can’t get that, then get on outta here.” According to Kali, *SL* equals role-playing. Andover elaborates on it a bit more, and he sees *Second Life* as an environment where he is free to be someone he cannot be offline.

In *Second Life* he attempts to create a space, where he is ”allowed to” act out his fantasies. Web has a similar approach and describes himself as a: ”happily married flirt, if you take me seriously, one of us will get hurt. Hopefully you (seriously!) Caution: Imaginary Road Ahead ... 45, Male, Happily Married, American. *SL* is my main social and creative outlet.” The question of how to define an online relationship is foregrounded in Smoke’s comment as well: ”If God intended for us to have just one perfect match in life – he underestimated the creation of *SL*, because now I have the ’best of both worlds”” This is seems to be the main charm for some of the residents. Based on the assumption that that *Second Life* is a ”virtual” world, and that virtual here automatically means ”make-belief,” they are in a position to claim that whatever happen in *SL* is not real, and does not have to be accounted for, since it happened in a ”virtual” world. This view, and these claims, stand in opposition to the idea of *Second Life* as a tool or communication platform. This is a part of the negotiation of what a virtual world is, but also what an online persona is, and to what extent the person behind that persona is accountable for its actions. What is ”just a fantasy”? What is ”reality”?

There is no ”consensual hallucination” inherent in *SL*, but there seem to be clearly defined genres in which people create their avatars. There are an infinite number of ways for a player to present themselves in *Second Life*, but the resident profiles I have looked at seem to favour already established social and cultural conventions when creating an online identity. As Mitch Kapor, the chairman of Linden Lab, says: ”[p]eople bring all their karma” – good or bad – into *SL*. Residents seem to attempt to recreate and reproduce social orders similar to the ones already existing outside *SL*, even though they are under no obligation to do so. Social and cultural patterns are repeated.

There are residents who take on the parts of characters in a romance novel, who see this as so central to their *Second Life* experience that this is what they choose to write about in their profiles. Others play the parts of other types of fantasy narratives – a knight in a hierarchical medieval kingdom, an officer in the *Star Trek* fleet, the submissive slave, the slave trader, the escort girl, the explorer/adventurer, or the Don Juan – and they write the profile that fits the character they have chosen to play. That is actually what the realism genre residents do as well. Almost like a cameo performance, they have chosen to play the part of themselves in this online environment – a narrative they ought to be familiar with. In fact, in *Second Life* the players are indeed taking role-playing a few steps further than they would be able to do if they were "only" reading a novel, fantasizing about being the main character in their favourite book. In *SL* they can sometimes act out their fantasies in interaction with other people, play the character of their choice together with others, if all participants share the same fantasy. But this requires people to have a knowledge about what they want. It requires rules that are spelled out, which some of the residents have realized already.

To what extent the persona reflect the person behind the avatar, is not for me to speculate on. What I have noticed is that people, sometimes with the help of the profiles and the knowledge people in general bring about the genres in which they want to play a part, tend to find like-minded with whom to create their online fiction. But even in a "virtual world" such as *Second Life* people tend to go in and out of character depending on the context, which is very similar to how it would work offline under the same circumstances. I would argue this is the case in the development of any new mass medium. When the Internet was not brand new anymore and some argued that it had been colonized by market forces, Marie-Laure Ryan pointed out that there were still "pockets of virtuality" (85) on the web. If I were to adapt her argument to this context I would say that there are definitely pockets of virtuality in *Second Life* as well, and presumably those will remain, but it is clear that *SL* increasingly is being used as a tool for many different purposes – communication, teaching, creative enterprises etc. – and perhaps this means that some of the initial magic and wonder will disappear. This seems already to have affected the way people create their avatars. I would predict that the result will be an increasing number of residents ignoring the role-playing aspect of *Second Life* while instead, as Kapor hints, using *SL* as a tool for creation, communication, learning... New uses are often found when technology and its users mature.

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