

# Of Mice or Men? – The Avatar in the Virtualscape

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## Abstract

*The study focuses on the relationship users of virtual worlds, such as Second Life, may or may not develop towards the avatar they use. A questionnaire was developed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from students engaged in a university assignment that required them to use an avatar in Second Life. The findings are contextualized and discussed: The distinction between the avatar and the self seems to be blurring.*

## 1. Introduction

Interactive and social virtual 3D environments have become more and more prominent in the mix of applications available on the Internet. In these ‘virtual worlds’ Second Life [17] with its large number of users, provides another way of building, interacting, socializing, communicating, collaborating and networking. For example 1,397,412 users logged in between 20.12.2009 and 18.01.2010; a snapshot as of 18.01.2010, 11am GMT, shows 40,015 users logged on concurrently interacting with each other in a variety of ways.

Second Life comes with high expectations. The residents – as the users of Second Life are called – have the ability to buy and sell items (such as clothing), land or services and a thriving economy has developed [19]. Meall [18] even concludes that due to its “rampant capitalism” Second Life has “the potential to make a lot of people more attractive, powerful and wealthy”.

In the education sector many university projects explore the possibilities of this medium (see for instance Kirriemuir, [16] for an overview over the many UK activities only). Tools that integrate the Second Life virtualscape with traditional web based systems have been developed [13] and Kingsley [15] expects it to supersede traditional content management systems. Others see it as a place for language education and inter-cultural development [9]. A research project at the University of Bedfordshire has investigated the role of Second Life groups for communities of practice [21]. In addition to the educational opportunities, Second Life also serves a role for social activities, recreation and dating [1]. Common to all of these activities is that

the users involved show a certain inclination toward the medium Second Life. Typically, the creation of the virtual self, the avatar, is the result of a voluntary decision. Avatar creation is a conscious and well thought through process [22].

From the social perspective the relationship between the avatar and the “real” person behind the computer screen is of particular interest. Cunningham [8] discusses how the “status of the body” is changed by immersing in the “virtualscape” of Second Life. Her analysis relates to a number of observations, in particular to Linden Labs’ claim that the avatar is the most personal expression with the implications of a “perfectible” avatar body. Second Life allows the user to modify their avatar in a variety of ways, according to one’s taste and this “taste is central in the representation of the avatar and the booming economy of Second Life relies on it” [8]. Cunningham also concludes that “norms [...] such as beauty standards or gender normativity persist in cyberspace”.

It is generally acknowledged that these observations are relevant in the current context of Second Life. However those users who have been researched chose to use an avatar as a self representation. In a future scenario however it is likely that Second Life will be also, if not mostly, populated by avatars that rather adopt the function of a tool to access a service. Given the predicted expansion of Second Life or similar environments as an economic and social space it can be envisaged that some people have no choice but to use an avatar as a representation in order to achieve a goal. For instance this will include professional “builders” that set up 3D landscapes or environments as a paid job for companies, students that enrol into a university course taught exclusively in Second Life, shoppers who wish to purchase items that are exclusively traded in Second Life or professional social workers who help to address social problems [12].

This may well compare with the development of Internet use. Fifteen years ago, the main users of the Internet were students of computer science, electronics or related topics. Today, people with no specialist skills or knowledge book flights over the Internet, read and write emails, participate in (virtual) communities of practice or network with

professional colleagues via Facebook and other software tools.

In our study we investigate the relationship between people and their avatars in a situation where the avatar serves as a “device” to achieve a certain goal. In the same way that a computer mouse eases the navigation on a two-dimensional screen, the avatar may well be perceived as merely a navigation tool for the 3-dimensional virtualscape of Second Life. However the “humanoid” features of the avatar in this three dimensional world might indeed represent a “reflection of self” as described in Cunningham’s paper [8].

In 2008/09 there were more than 800 students enrolled in a University of Bedfordshire unit on Professional Project Management, drawn from ten different MSc Computing programmes. In this unit Second Life plays an integral role in teaching and assessment. For those students the Second Life avatar is a tool; a means to achieve the goals set by a university assignment, where the emphasis is on building a showcase using project management methodology [7]. This situation was considered ideal to explore the issues discussed above.

## 2. Avatar and Identity

Sébastien Genvo [11], in an essay on digital play, suggests that the video game player may be “engrossed in his game although he knows that after all it is only a game”. King and Krzywinska [14] argue that immersion in a virtual world would only result in the assumption of the subjectivity of a character within that world if that virtual reality were to become as convincingly naturalistic as the external lifeworld. One is reminded of Walter Benjamin’s distinction between a critical immersion within culture and an uncritical absorption of culture [6].

These notions of the integrity of identity in the face of cultural or virtual immersion require, however, the existence of an a priori subjectivity – founded upon the romantic notion of an essence of selfhood – or upon the prioritization of material experience as somehow more influential upon the propagation of subjectivity than digitally mediated experience (as though our physical interactions might for some reason mould our identities more forcefully than those hours spent in the virtual space of the electronic media).

There is, of course, no difference between material and virtual experience: it is just that we tend to use the word ‘virtual’ in depicting forms of experience mediated by more recently evolved technologies. We are defined by performance and play as much as by ‘real life’ activity – insofar as there is, of course, no difference between these phenomena, except one imposed by economically and ergonomically determined epistemologies. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, famously

describes the way that a waiter in a café plays at being a waiter: “All his behaviour seems to us a game” [20]. Sartre’s point is that it is such play or pretence which defines identity: existence precedes essence, the parts we play define our subjectivity.

Slavoj Žižek [23] also notes that pretence, performance or play has always generated ‘real’ subjectivities. When immersed in performative activity (as we always are) our suspension of disbelief creates an identity for whom that belief is permanent and absolute:

*“This other subject who fully believes need not exist for the belief to be operative [...] From the so-called ‘weepers’, women hired to cry at funerals in ‘primitive’ societies [...] to the adoption of an avatar in cyberspace, the same sort of phenomenon is at work. When I construct a ‘false’ image of myself which stands for me in a virtual community in which I participate [...] the emotions I feel and ‘feign’ as part of my onscreen persona are not simply false. Although what I experience as my ‘true self’ does not feel them, they are none the less in a sense ‘true’.”*

If there is no difference, then, between the ways in which material and digital experience construct subjectivity, should the notion of identity within the virtual realm in any way concern us? What is different, of course, about contemporary digital culture is its globally homogeneous nature, and (through the speed and seamlessness of its operation) the ease with which it disguises its ideological and economic construction. The virtual environment, like any mode of conventional realism, smoothes out the wrinkles in material reality, offering a realm whose continuity of logic makes more sense (and appears more realistic) than the incoherence of the material world. Its realism offers an immersion in the ultimate escapist fantasy – the fantasy of ontological logic.

John Fiske [10] wrote that conventional realism “reproduces reality in such a form as to make it understandable. It does this primarily by ensuring that all links and relationships between its elements are clear and logical, that the narrative follows the basic laws of cause and effect, and that every element is there for the purpose of helping to make sense.” Reality of course lacks this seamless continuity: a cosy continuity which makes things so understandable that we do not make the effort to understand them.

Even if she were not lulled into critical complacency by the faultless logic of the virtual experience, its speed of operation barely allows its user time for such independent reflection. In their discussion of early film, Adorno and Horkheimer [2] argue that “sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts.” The velocity of the virtual world leaves cinema standing.

Yet it is ultimately the transcultural uniformity and universality of the digital domain which most obviously suggests a paradigm shift in the mediation of identity. For the first time in human history, the cultural difference which gave that history its momentum appears to be in the process of being replaced by a single world view, a ubiquitous mode of mediation. It is not the ‘virtuality’ of digital culture so much as its globalization which underpins its potential to determine subjectivity. History as we knew it appears to be over, and we are entering what Baudrillard [4] called “a world so real, hyperreal, operational and programmed that it no longer has any need to be true. Or rather it is true, absolutely true, in the sense that nothing any longer stands opposed to it.”

The homogeneity, seamlessness, rationality and apparent safeness of the virtual environment are precisely the factors which may reduce its users’ ability to resist its influences.

When we are, as Louis Althusser [3] might say, interpellated into the subjectivity of our chosen avatar, we tend not to notice the extent to which that avatar may have chosen us (insofar as our selection is anticipated and determined by the avatar’s own design), and the impact that it may thereby have upon us.

When we consider the use of such commercial and ideologically westernizing products as Second Life within educational contexts, the issue of such influence upon the construction of identity becomes a crucial matter of pedagogical, ethical and epistemological concern.

### 3. Method

This study was carried out in the context of an assignment in the unit Professional Project Management at the University of Bedfordshire that ran from February 2009 to June 2009. A total of 813 students were enrolled on the unit. The students had been allocated to project teams of about 16 members each. One task for each project team was the production of a Second Life ‘showcase’ (other tasks included the production of a wiki-page, research, and general project management). It was the decision of each individual team on how many of the team were allocated to the Second Life task in particular. In order to be able to build structures in Second Life students had to be enrolled into a specific group (that had been set up for this purpose only). Out of the total of the 813 students 283 requested (and received) enrolments into that group.

On signing up to Second Life, users are required to select one of twelve possible avatars, which they can then modify if they so choose. In order to explore the extent to which students ‘identify with’ and/or modify their avatars, we designed a six-page questionnaire consisting of 16 items. We asked for

basic demographic information (gender, age, ethnicity) about the participant, and description of/modifications to their chosen avatars.



Figure 1: The avatars users can choose at setup

208 completed questionnaires were returned to the research team, giving a response rate of 73.5%.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Human or not human

The mechanics of Second Life enable the Second Life resident to change their avatar into various forms. They can be human; fantasy figures such as fairies or vampires; animals like dogs, cats and tigers; robots and so on. We asked “Does your current SL avatar have human characteristics?” and subsequently “If your avatar is not human, what form does it take?” 175 of the 208 students (84.1%) answered ‘yes’ to the first question. 17 respondents (8.2%) answered with ‘no’ and 16 respondents (7.7%) left the answer blank. However of those who answered ‘no’ it would seem that at least some of them interpreted the question in a more metaphysical way. Five of those 17 students gave comments to the second question (which form does it take?) such as ‘It’s just an animated image and controlled by the user’. These responses are discussed further in the concluding section of this article. Only one student answered the second question as it was intended by the researcher, the response being “spirit, cloud”. Even this might be a consequence of a software or network problems, as (at the time when this research was conducted) a ‘cloud’ was what the user would see of their avatar when the Second Life software client cannot determine the ‘true’ form because, for instance, of network or database problems. We can conclude that the vast majority of, and possibly all, students kept their avatar in a ‘human’ form. One student who left the first question (‘Does your current avatar have human characteristics?’) blank answered the next question (‘...what form does it take’) with ‘ROBOT’. Another student who answered the first question with ‘yes’ added a slash “/” as an answer to the following question.

## 4.2 Gender and Age

Of the 208 students who participated, 182 (87.5%) were male and 26 (12.5%) were female. 145 (69.7%) were between 18 and 24 years, 58 (27.9%) were between 25 and 34 years old, and 5 (%) were over 34 years old.

Most students (187; 89.9%) chose an avatar that matched their own gender. Five of the 171 male students chose a female avatar and two of the 23 female students chose a male avatar. 13 students left the question blank. One student indicated that they had two avatars – one of each gender.

## 4.3 Ethnicity

The largest proportion (162; 77.9%) of respondents were Indian; 17 (8.2%) were African; and 10 (4.8%) were Pakistani. The remaining 19 (9.1%) either did not disclose their ethnicity or were from other ethnic groups.

Most respondents (144; 69.2%) indicated that they are Indian, and male. Of these, 111 answered the question on which avatar they chose when they signed up to Second Life. During the signing up process they were presented with the choice of twelve avatars (see Figure 1). The avatar they chose would be the ‘default’ that they would later be able to change. Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of percentages of this initial choice for males and females respectively.

The results show that more than half of the students, 58.6% (65 from 111), signed up for one particular avatar. In a subsequent question we asked about the skin colour of the avatar. Here, 81 (66.4% of the 122 who answered this question other than ‘don’t remember’ or ‘don’t know’) reported a medium skin. We may conclude here that the students in the study choose an avatar that resembles themselves, or at least choose the most ambiguous avatar.

On a much smaller sample we can identify a similar tendency with the seven male African students who answered the question on which avatar they choose. Six of the seven chose an avatar with a dark skin colour.

Of the twelve female Indian students who answered the question, half of them chose the same avatar. None chose an avatar with a dark skin colour.

There were in total twelve avatars to choose from at signup. The avatars J, K and L were not chosen by any respondents.

## 4.4 Names

When the students first login they choose a first and last name for their avatar. The last name has to

be picked from a list provided by Second Life (this list of last names changes over time). If two users choose the same first name, they still can be distinguished by their last name, so there are virtually no restrictions on the choice of first name.

**Table 1 Avatar choice of male respondents**

(male)	Indian	Pakistani	African	Other / no answer
A	65 (58.6%)	4 (40%)	1 (14.3%)	7 (58.3%)
B	21(18.9%)	2 (20%)		1 (8.3%)
C	6 (5.4%)	3 (30%)	6 (85.7%)	
D	12 (10.8%)			2 (16.7%)
E	3 (2.7%)			2 (16.7%)
F	2 (1.8%)			
G	1 (0.9%)	1 (10%)		
H	1 (0.9%)			
	<b>111</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>12</b>

**Table 2 Avatar choice of female respondents**

(female)	Indian	African	White
H	7 (58.3%)	2 (50%)	1 (100%)
G	3 (25%)	1 (25%)	
B		1 (25%)	
A	1 (8.3%)		
I	1 (8.3%)		
<b>Total</b>	<b>12 (100%)</b>	<b>4 (100%)</b>	<b>1 (100%)</b>

We wanted to know to what extent respondents chose a first name related to their own name. For this we defined four categories of similarity: ‘same’, ‘part’, ‘related’, ‘different’. For instance if the user’s name were ‘Jonathan Bloggs’, then the avatar names ‘Jonathan’ and ‘Bloggs’ would fall into the ‘same’ category. Names such as ‘Jon’ or ‘Blog’ would fall into the ‘part’ category. Related names would be ‘joeblogg’, ‘blogg193’, etc. Names that are different might be anything else (such as ‘flux’, ‘Brandy’, and so on). Obviously the distinction between ‘related’ and ‘different’ is a matter of judgment. A different name may actually refer to a nickname for the real person. Anecdotally we know that people use one avatar name across more than one platform (i.e. they use the same name for emails and both single-user and multi-user games). It was not possible to capture those instances in our study – one of the limitations of using a questionnaire as a research tool. Despite this, 67.4% (116 out of 172) of our respondents

chose an avatar strongly related to their real life identity (see Table 3).

**Table 3 Real names and avatar names**

Respondent's Avatar Name	#Resp.	% Resp.
<b>Same as real name</b>	74	43%
<b>Part of real name</b>	15	8.7%
<b>Derived from/related to real name</b>	20	11.6%
<b>Related to group name</b>	7	4.1%
<b>Different</b>	56	32.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 5. Discussion

It seems significant that the majority of students surveyed had selected an avatar which both was human and was either related to their gender or ethnicity or could be interpreted as ethnically ambivalent or gender-ambiguous – very few selected an avatar which was unrelated to their own appearance. This suggests an identification with the avatar as an extension of the user's self. Yet the ease with which a pre-designed avatar can be selected and used without any necessary customization – and the fact that Second Life provides only a dozen such templates to choose from (all of which represent images of health youth and textbook normalcy – as though it is inconceivable that users might wish, for example, to represent their age, disability or obesity) – interpellate the user within an ideologized ideal of physical appearance. Thus the user comes to associate themselves with a subjectivity which is only vaguely related to their own. This vague relationship legitimizes and cements that association; in this way, the user adopts as part of themselves a subjectivity which has been constructed externally, a self-image not of the user's own creation. Although the majority of students surveyed chose names for their avatars identical or related to their own names, nearly a third chose names apparently unrelated, as if conscious of the difference between their own subjectivity and that of the avatar, and therefore stressing the distance between these subjectivities as a barrier against the melding or confusion of these senses of self.

## 6. Conclusion

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this study, however, is related to those students who were most aware of the distance between themselves and their avatars: those who selected non-human forms for their avatars. In answer to the question as to what form their avatar took, one of the students surveyed answered that it was “just an animated image and controlled by the user”. Another responded that it

was an “animated image”; another suggested it was “a kind of Avatar which run's [sic] with the command of creator.” Yet another proposed that “it is just a device or just a doll which is been [sic] controlled by some buttons.” All of these responses offer a critically revealing misreading of the question. Rather than, as expected, describing the actual form of their avatar, these respondents chose to explain its intended function. Thus, they simultaneously deny the substance of their avatar (as though to admit to such substance would be to afford it an independent, and therefore inter-dependent, existence), and emphasize that it is merely an image and a device, a virtual puppet or tool. This stress upon the user's absolute and essential control of the avatar, in denying the existential influence which the avatar's form and performance may have upon the user's own subjectivity, may of course suggest a telling anxiety in relation to that notion. The misinterpretation of the question suggests an unconscious resistance to the notion of the avatar's influence; yet, in denying the possibility of that influence (in refusing even to countenance that question), the user not only reveals, in their discomfort, an unconscious awareness of this same influence, but also opens themselves up to that influence – insofar as the resistance to the possibility of influence itself lowers one's alertness and actual resistance to that influence itself. The avatar itself, like any successful performative act, is structured to disguise the fact that it is performing upon its user as much as it is performed upon; if the user were to recognize their own interpellation or assimilation within the structured puppetry of the virtual situation then they would of course more actively resist the assumption of this alternative mode of subjectivity.

A further four students surveyed responded to this question. Their responses are somewhat opaque. One suggested that their avatar was a “spirit, cloud”. It is unclear whether this is a physical description of the avatar or a philosophical interpretation of its status; indeed, it appears to be both. The avatar is a cloud-like or nebulous spirit insofar as it is an aethereal, virtual image; yet it is also a ‘spirit’ in as much as it is an actual soul or subject within itself.

Another student surveyed described their avatar with the single, enigmatic word “Lite”. The avatar is of course a creature of light – which is, again, at once physically aethereal and yet fundamentally and uniquely real, the essential constant of the universe. The spelling of ‘light’ as “lite” might however suggest something more: that term, in contemporary commercial parlance, of course suggests a less substantial version of something else. This might therefore suggest that the avatar is merely a less substantial substitute for the material, a ‘lite’ version dependent upon the original. Yet when, in the words of Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska [14] “the distinction between reality and simulation [...]

appear to blur” – or when, as Jean Baudrillard [5] suggests, “you wonder whether the world itself isn’t just here to serve as advertising copy in some other world” – it begins to seem that material reality might be just as ‘lite’ as the simulation, or even more so, and the simulacrum starts to take on an existence of its own.

Another of the students in the group described their avatar as a “ROBOT”. Again, it seems uncertain whether this represents a description of the avatar’s appearance or of its function, and (once more) it appears to be both. The avatar may look like a robot, and act like a robot, and, if so, one does not have to be Isaac Asimov to note the anxiety which this word may express – an anxiety related to the robot’s perceived potential for the evolution of self-determination.

However, the most opaque and enigmatic response from any of the students surveyed was simply: “/”. Perhaps that sums up the relationship between the user and the avatar as concisely and precisely as one might ever manage: it is the slash or stroke, the borderline between two modes of existence, the permeable boundary between a material and a virtual subjectivity. The avatar is not that virtual subjectivity itself, but the route of access to that subjectivity, a point of entry into an essentially alternative idiom of performance and therefore mode of being, a gateway to alterity.

The interface between these states of being thus diminishes into the narrowest symbol, that forward-slash which allows access to the virtual world. No longer a barrier but an opening gateway, that diagonal line blurs the distinctions between software, hardware and self – between simulations, avatars, keyboards, mice, women and men.

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