

Face, Authenticity, Transformations and Aesthetics in *Second Life*

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Abstract

In such 3D virtual environments (3DVEs) as *Second Life*, one can 'be' re-created as avatar in whatever form one wants to be, facilitated by extensive beauty and cosmetic industries to help the residents of this world achieve a particular kind of glamorous image – limited only by their imaginations and Linden Dollar accounts. Yet, others in 3DVEs are working hard to re-create their avatars to be replicas of their 'offline' selves, appearing as they do in actuality. Such phenomena provide a rich opportunity to explore the cultural contexts of 'self-making', the process of 'becoming' and the transformative, often transgressive, processes of 'beauty practices' as bodily praxis and serious play. Drawing on their international ethnographic research undertaken in *Second Life*, the authors explore the phenomenon of image, affect, subjectivity and representation in this alternative arena. We focus specifically on three interrelated and paradoxical aspects of self-making in this 3D virtual world: first, the ways in which many of our respondents described their avatar personae as symbolically representing their 'authentic inner selves'; second, the ways our respondents used photography and video to verify and authenticate these 'inner selves', through capturing representations of their avatar bodies in action; and, third, the ways 'authenticity', for many of our respondents, depended on their avatar image aligning as closely as possible with their bodily appearance off-screen. The concept of what residents of *Second Life* understand as constituting the 'authentic inner self' both in and outside of the virtual world becomes particularly pertinent here.

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The body is in the social world but the social world is in the body.
(Bourdieu, 1990: 190)

With good reason postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice yet, so it seems to me, not enough surprise has been expressed as to how we nevertheless get on with living, pretending – thanks to the mimetic faculty – that we live facts not fictions. (Tausig, 1993: xv).

Introduction: Representing the Protean Self

This article examines three aspects of self-making (Battaglia, 1995) that emerged from our two-year (2008–10) international project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council¹ (formerly known as the Carrick Institute). The study explored the socio-cultural dimensions of 3D virtual environments (hereafter, 3DVEs) with a particular focus on *Second Life*. In the process of this research, we were alerted, first, to the ways many of our respondents described their avatar persona as symbolically representing their ‘authentic’ inner self, as they understood and articulated it; this was despite their being able to create, transform and manipulate their avatar identities at will. In other words, the online residents in *Second Life* felt that through their avatars they could perceive, create, manage and maintain the outward appearance of what they felt was a fixed innate core self (Bessant, 2010; Ferrara, 2009; Gilpin et al., 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2003) even while simultaneously acknowledging the continual process of transformation, of becoming ‘other’ (Coleman, 2008a; Grosz, 1999; Hickey-Moody, 2009; Hickey-Moody and Wood, 2008a).

Second, we were intrigued by the ways our *Second Life* respondents used photography and video to somehow verify this authentic *inner* self by capturing and documenting key moments in their *Second Life* history through *external* manifestations of their avatar body *in performance*. These moments centred on aspects that they described as expressions of their ‘real self’ beneath the avatar representation (see Boellstorff, 2008: 129).

The third related aspect that we explore here is the way representations of ‘authenticity’ of the ‘real self’, for many of our respondents, depended on their avatar image aligning as closely as

possible with their bodily appearance off-screen. All three of these areas led us to look more closely at what our respondents understood by the authentic self and then to consider the relationship between image and affect in such self-representations, what Featherstone describes as ‘the way media images are *felt* through the body’ (2010: 195, emphasis added). To interpret both of these concepts within the context of *Second Life*, we need first to revisit the complex relationship between embodiment and concepts of the ‘authentic self’.

Bodies and Authenticity

The body remains an integral aspect of the (inner) self and personal identity within consumer culture and its key marker of distinction, ‘the site of intensified self management, self regulation and self mastery’ (Elliott, 2001: 99), even in virtual environments. Clothes, physique, gait, gesture, hair and particularly the face of one’s avatar are just as important in virtual worlds as in actual environments as indicators of how one wants one’s character and personality to be perceived in particular social contexts. Popular assumptions linking bodily appearance and especially facial features with inner character and personality traits are still strongly held beliefs even in 3DVEs, even though ‘the many valences of physiognomy’ (Pearl, 2010: 6) prompt a variety of arbitrary conclusions, depending ‘on who was looking, who was being looked at, when and why’ (2010: 6; see also Black, 2011). Such beliefs underpin much of the hype of consumer culture, which promises that modification and cosmetic transformation of the body will reveal a more socially acceptable self, since people with ‘an enhanced appearance will be able to enjoy a body and face which are more congruent with their “true” selves’ (Featherstone, 2010: 195).

These promises also indicate that such modifications are designed not so much to transform as to reveal; hidden beneath the layers of everyday banality lies the authentic, the ideal self just waiting to be discovered and exposed, erasing all evidence of the passing of time and experience. Karen Throsby (2008) notes the significant investment in authenticity for people she interviewed who were undergoing or had undergone weight loss surgery.² For this group of individuals the discourse of being ‘reborn’ through surgical intervention indicates not simply the creation of a new self but rather the restoration of the authentic self. In other words, the reborn ‘new me’

body re-aligned with the self is, in fact, the ‘real me’ (Throsby, 2008: 119). Of course, such a restorative discourse, of finding and maintaining ‘the real me’ is not so easily achieved or maintained either for Throsby’s subjects or our own respondents. Our online study too inevitably reflected the complex cultural, political and narrative contexts and the paradoxical task of discovering and capturing that authentic self (Hoover, 2006; Karre and Lundby, 2008) that exist in both virtual and actual cultural environments.

The central problem is that the inner ‘true self’ is notoriously elusive and impossible to define, even for those people convinced of its reality. Erin Manning, building on Daniel Stern’s (1985) psychological models of human development, argues for the concept of the ‘true’ inner self to be rethought. Rather than a model of ‘self–self interactions’, where reflexive *interaction* ‘is understood to be between two self-contained entities (human/human or human/object)’ (Manning, 2009: 34), Stern posits a concept of ‘non-self-reflexive awareness’ of the event, which occurs through *relation*.³ In this conception, the self is not contained but is a modality, in a ‘fold of immanent expressibility’ where ‘vitality affects’ or the range of affects which are ‘elicited by changes in motivational states, appetites and tensions’ (Stern, 1985: 54, cited in Manning, 2009: 37) become the key to understanding how the concept of the self emerges.

In this model, there is no one individual ‘true self’ but rather ever emergent ‘senses of self’ ongoing through a process of ‘individuation’ whereby different experiences together with different aspects and components of the immature psyche become integrated over time into a well-functioning but illusory coherent whole:

Becoming human is expressed singularly and repeatedly throughout a life in the passage from the feeling of content to the content of feeling. . . . It is a momentary cohesiveness that we call a sense of self that always remains coloured by the force that directed its unification, a virtual effect that acts like a shadow on all dreams of containment. (Manning, 2009: 36)

These arguments help explain why the idea of a persistent, ‘real self’ can seem to persist, despite multiple embodiments within virtual environments, many of which might appear grotesque or bizarre, including non-human or trans-species appearance.⁴

Drawing on Stern's and Manning's insights together with the works of Vannini (2006), Vannini and Franzese (2008), and Franzese (2009), we understand this concept of the real or authentic self, in this context, as 'an individual's subjective sense that their behavior, appearance, self, reflects their sense of core being' (Franzese, 2009: 87). Authenticity of course is an extremely complex concept, its definition varying considerably according to academic discipline, era and culture. The two overarching ways of defining authenticity in academia seem to be divided between arts/culture and science-based approaches. The fields of humanities, philosophy and cultural studies refer to metaphysical and moral attributes associated with the concept of authenticity (for example see Golumb, 1998; Trilling, 1972). Social scientists, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists, on the other hand, tend to be interested in a more pragmatic approach, investigating the ways the individual herself perceives feelings of a coherent self (Turner and Gordon, 1981; Turner and Schutte, 1981; Vannini, 2006). In post-industrial societies, with the increased commodification of the authentic, 'the possibilities of being genuine, authentic or inauthentic are more extensive than ever' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 136). The hard work or linguistic, symbolic and physical resources drawn on to assert authenticity are continually in flux, dependent for their acceptance on the circumstances, situations, settings and culture in which they are asserted. In their online discussions, when our respondents described themselves and their avatar representations as 'authentic', they referred to attributes of autonomy, timelessness, genuineness, realness and originality.

At the same time, when our respondents variously described their avatars as capable of portraying authentic aspects of their inner selves they often explained that they were referring to something beyond their physical manifestations: 'an affective body without image, the more incomplete and open body, which is affected by other people's bodies in a variety of ways, which bypass the alleged "all seeing eye" and work beneath the level of consciousness and language' (Featherstone, 2010: 199).

Fascinatingly, for many this description of 'an affective body without image' persisted despite (or perhaps because of) any discrepancy between this ideal inner self and their (sometimes bizarre) avatar representations or their lived bodies offline, which bore the physical marks of time. Again, Throsby's insights drawn

from her work with weight loss surgery patients is informative. She too noted that her respondents perceived their 'pre-transformative body as discordant with the true self' (Throsby, 2008: 119). In our project, our respondents perceived their 'true self' as being manifest through a range of distinctive and differing bodily forms, both real and virtual. This incongruence between the invisible inner self, the physical body and the virtual representation became particularly intriguing when we realized that realist photographic and digital video images, which Featherstone called 'a prosthetic for imaginative work' (2010: 198), were the main tools many used to verify their sense of core authenticity throughout their bodily transformations when they were actively in *Second Life*, described as being 'in world'. For some individuals, however, their search for authenticity meant ensuring that their outward avatar appearance closely resembled their off-screen bodily appearance. Our personal encounters in *Second Life* demonstrated these complexities so it is to these issues we turn now.

Authenticity and Avatars in *Second Life*

In virtual, immersive environments, regular participants or 'residents' re-create auditory and visual representations of themselves as avatars in whatever form they desire: human or non-human species; conventionally gendered, or cross- or trans-gendered; able-bodied or displaying a disability. For example, some residents who identify as being disabled in their 'actual lives' choose to construct their virtual identity as being without disability, while others highlight their physical or physiological 'difference' by removing limbs, using a virtual wheelchair or guide dog, or adding a prosthesis. Similarly, many people explore totally different types of embodiment, including skin colour, gender and ethnicity in their virtual environments, discovering first-hand what it might feel like to relate to others in a different skin and body (see Christie and Bloustien, 2010; Hickey-Moody and Wood, 2008b). Such possibilities are rendered even more complex by the fact that an individual may simultaneously construct different avatar presences by creating multiple accounts. Furthermore, there are some groups that deliberately *share* an avatar so the persona can be created and re-created collaboratively at will (see Au, 2004).



Figure 1. Avatars and their labelled names, on Avatar Island.

Residents control their avatar creations in a similar way to a puppeteer manipulating their puppets since the default screen point of view (POV) for each resident is the view from just behind her avatar. They manage the avatar as an extension of themselves, a separate being as others see it. The given name of the avatar appears in type above its head, further enhancing the ‘fourth-wall’ effect of emotional distance (see Figure 1).

On the other hand the subjective ‘mouse view’ function enables the resident to seemingly embody the avatar and look through its eyes. The mouse view produces the effect of being embedded in the 3D world, at one with the avatar so that the resident sees and hears what the avatar would.

Yet one can never completely be at one with one’s screen body for the sense of unity is also constantly disrupted by one’s off-screen environment, including the microphone, headsets, telephones, the computer chair, problems with one’s server and one’s real-life surroundings, relationships and social networks (Giannachi, 2004; Stone, 1994: 173).

Another aspect that continually threatens to break the mimetic spell is the use of non-aural, text communication, which can still be seen non-diegetically in a separate text box. Furthermore, a right mouse click on the default function button suddenly renders the avatar lifeless like a mummified corpse, staring at the owner but suspended in time and motion (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Editing appearance.

At any time, then, it is possible to alternate between these two contrasting POVs, although only the default camera POV allows still or video shots of the avatar. Such alternating POV positioning offers close identification and distancing in the same way that a cinematic perspective enables the privileged spectator to move between seeing the diegetic world through the eyes of a specific character, and then moving seamlessly to a third-person POV of other characters.

Michael Taussig's (1993) concepts of mimesis and alterity are useful here when considering the alternations between subjective and objective POV and the effect on notions of the inner, authentic self. Taussig argued that a mimetic faculty, which is both a process and a movement towards a relationship between two separate items, is engendered through close physical contact with something that seems to imitate something else. The 'formidable mimetic faculty', he argues, is 'the basis for judging similitude' (Taussig, 1993: 213). It invokes an 'optical tactility, plunging us into the plane where the object world and the visual copy merge' (1993: 35). It is:

The faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power. (1993: xiii)

For Taussig the process of mimesis leads towards a 'radical displacement of self', for this 'fundamental move of the mimetic faculty' takes us 'bodily into alterity' (1993: 40). Thus mimetic faculty is but the other side of the coin to alterity or cultural otherness, because of the way that we generate knowledge of the self and the world through identifications of similarity and difference.

Through this mimetic faculty the individual viewing an artefact or artwork becomes implicated in, and part of, the work that is being viewed; our bodies appear to become one with the artefact or process (also see Bloustien, 2003). This sense of embodiment with the virtual would seem to echo Michael Taussig's view that, in the process of our everyday encounters, we continue to pretend 'that we live facts not fictions' (Taussig, 1993: xv). This imbrication becomes broken or disturbed when we are forced through mimetic excess, or what Taussig describes as 'mimetic self-awareness' (1993: 252), through exaggeration or humour to recognize the difference or alterity between what we see as similar and how we perceive the self. We will return to this concept shortly.

It is worth noting that, because of this close sense of affinity between the actual and the virtual self, violence or 'untimely' death in *Second Life* can be experienced as a traumatic event. In world, deliberate violent or destructive actions, such as online vandalism to cause annoyance or distress, are known as 'griefing'. Griefing can range from relatively minor acts of harassment to full-blown virtual acts of cyber-bullying that intentionally inflict harm or destruction. Damage can be to the avatars themselves or to items of virtual property. As journalist John Quain pointed out, 'What often starts out as a prank (called "griefing" by enthusiasts) can turn into a violent rampage, such as a virtual shooting outside an American Apparel store' (2007: 15).

Victims' reactions to griefing highlight how strongly individuals feel intricately enmeshed with their avatars; they seem aspects of their inner 'true' selves so that griefing attacks are experienced phenomenologically as though they were actual physical violations. In Jim Giles' 2007 interviews with victims of griefing in *Second Life*, one woman explained that her distress was compounded by the perpetrators also revealing her real-life identity and attacking her photo-realistic representation:

The first time I was personally attacked came as a shock. . . . The griefer cut my picture up into particles and blew them around which made it doubly unsettling. They also made a giant bust of me based on my real-life picture, defaced it and made racist versions of it. It's very creepy. (Catherine Fitzpatrick, quoted in Giles, 2007: 52–3)

Fitzpatrick's sense of violation intensified because the 'griever' had publicly exposed and disseminated the virtual and the actual representations together and destroyed them.

While *in world*, residents may be simultaneously engaging in a variety of relationships and communities, through a variety of alternative personas and identities or 'alts'. Yet, at the same time, all residents describe one particular avatar as their primary and default online identity. This tends to be the first avatar they created (Boellstorff, 2008: 133). As Krueger notes, 'people have a very proprietary feeling towards their image [i.e. their avatar]. What happens to it happens to them. What touches it, they feel' (1983: 127–8, cited in Boellstorff, 2008: 129).⁵ Particularly apt for our own study, it has been noted that many users come to see their primary avatars as truer, more authentic versions of their inner selves than their selves in their offline worlds (Taylor, 2002: 54).

Yet this is not because the *Second Life* residents necessarily feel a greater sense of freedom online. No online community exists in a cultural vacuum since, despite the 'carnavalesque' quality of virtual worlds, much of the activity and the architecture is mundane and circumscribed, reflecting the norms and realities of actual life (Burnett, 2007). Indeed, Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2007) see virtual worlds as parodies of consumer society, with the constraints and restrictions from offline lives spilling over and blurring online experiences; behaviour is strongly influenced by the specific cultural politics and mores of each actual and virtual community (Olkowski, 1999), as well as the terms of service of the company that operates a given virtual world.

For example, public displays of modesty are considered as important in *Second Life* as offline, depending on which SIM (online community) one might visit or inhabit. Every SIM in *Second Life* has a rating system as either PG or Mature. PG SIMs indicate that some content may not be suitable for sensitive individuals, even though all

residents must be over 18 and within the SIM there can be no nudity, fighting, harassment, use of weapons or vulgar language. Mature SIMs allow adult content. Linden Lab (the company that operates *Second Life*) has strict regulations, which include the types of avatar attachments that may be displayed in public places on PG SIMS. Violation of community standards may be punishable through suspension or expulsion from the virtual worlds.

Newcomers to *Second Life* have to learn the social norms of the culture, some of which are specific to particular communities or groupings as well as to more widespread conventions (Boellstorff, 2008: 124). Such juxtapositions of the actual and the virtual reveal the paradoxes evident in everyday offline experiences, exposing the virtual both as a space for aesthetic and technological innovation as well as the site of politics and ethics, 'the constructedness of all those categories and terms through which we are defined' (Blackman, 1998: 133).

The limited default avatar templates offered by the platform dictate the extent of many people's initial experiments with gender, body shape, style and clothing. To customize this simplified default appearance, other appearances, styles and even avatars have to be created or purchased, yet even this is influenced by the existing social and cultural norms of *Second Life*. In *Second Life*, as in all cultures, there is tremendous pressure to conform to the perceived norms, to gain acceptance or to avoid social censure (see Hornsey et al., 2003). So, for example, it was made clear to us by others that one should avoid looking like a 'noob' (a newly arrived resident), which would indicate that one is not a free-thinking individual or a fully established, legitimate member of *Second Life*. Wood particularly felt compelled to change the look of her avatar (which she had been perfectly satisfied with) after she received an unsolicited text message warning 'you really should do something about your [i.e. her avatar's] hair'. Her avatar, she was told insultingly, looked like a 'Ruth', meaning the default *Second Life* female avatar body, which indicates a lack of originality. The more biologically accurate the avatar body appears in terms of its skin tone, body shape, appearance of hair texture, gesture and movements, the more sophisticated, and therefore the more the resident is deemed to be an established member of *Second Life*. For some residents this also enhanced their claim to personal integrity and authenticity. Criteria for belonging and acceptance, even of oneself, rely on the judgement of others for, as Crossley points out:

We do depend on upon feedback (explicit and tacit) from others in our efforts to construct a me because so much of what matters about ourselves is only perceptible to us by way of the mirror image reflected back to us in the reactions of others. (2011: 98)

I Imagine, I Record, ergo I Exist

Within these social and cultural constraints, photography becomes an essential tool in *Second Life* to reflect upon, document and experiment with image management and reinforce a sense of self. The ability to take simple digital snapshots of one's appearance is one of the default tools available even for novices in *Second Life*. As the residents become more adept with the technology they can enhance their skills and the software to create more complex photographs and videos *in world*, or they can use the professional services of *Second Life* photographic studios.⁶ These images are then often shared beyond *Second Life* through other social media sites like YouTube. It is the recorded *representation* of the bodily transformations that seems to be important in *Second Life*, the *process* of 'becoming', of monitoring and displaying key moments of the *protean* self as it developed within its virtual environments.

The use of photography in *Second Life* to verify an invisible sign of identity should not completely surprise us. It arguably reflects a broader cultural trend since photographs and videos are increasingly being used as voyeuristic tools for surveillance, identification and authentication by a wide range of state and civilian organizations. Virtual systems theory calls such governmental and regulatory structures 'location technologies' designed 'to halt or reverse the gradual and pervasive disappearance of the socially and legally constituted individual in society in which the meanings of terms such as distance and direction are subject to increasing slippage' (Stone, 1994: 181).

Indeed, photography has always conveyed its meaning far beyond the static *image*; for it also represents a *presence* (Featherstone, 1995, 2010; Sontag, 1977), an affective link between the image and the human observer. With the reflexive and interactive capacities of new digital technologies, this connection has become clearer, opening up the static 'mirror image' of the photograph to 'become a process, one that directly involves the body's affective apparatus' (Featherstone, 2010: 199). Advanced software techniques now offer new perspectives



Figure 3. Asha with more lifelike hair, appearance and pose.

on the ‘dislocation of time and space’ (Wells, 2003: 1). They excite, evoke and ‘trick’ our memories (Berger, 1980, cited in Wells, 2003), operating indirectly on our desires, needs and identifications (Adams, 2000; see also Berger, 1982). In her research on teenage girls and their engagement with media images, Rebecca Coleman also demonstrated how “‘things” are not separate but inextricably linked’ (2008b: 107). Drawing on a feminist-Deleuzian ontology of becoming combined with insights from Henri Bergson’s method of intuition, Coleman argued that the girls constituted their own sense of body image *through* their relations with media images of others, arguing that these relations ‘define, or, better, create or invent, the girls’ bodies’ (Coleman, 2008b: 108). Her work suggests that the affective relationship between representational photography and identity underscores the importance of new or additional forms of ‘mediatized’ self-making, of the desire to constitute and represent the ‘authentic’ self even in virtual spaces, particularly through the recorded image.

Selfhood, Authenticity and Affect in *Second Life*

Over time, as was the case with many of our respondents, we too became determined to improve our avatars’ appearances by making them more representationally lifelike in skin texture, appearance and posture (and took photographs of our transformations: see Figures 3 and 4).⁷



Figure 4. DenleeI with more lifelike textures, appearance and pose.

Wood studied ways of making the texture of her avatar's skin and the appearance and movement of the hair and gestures more realistic. Bloustien was equally fascinated to improve her avatar's gestures and gait. She had already discovered that, when talking to people in *Second Life*, it felt more genuine if the people she was engaging with responded to the discussions with realistic body language cues, such as nodding, shifting feet or changing stance. As indicated above, this desire for the authentic is not simply a subjective experience but intersubjective and 'socially mediated' (Gilpin et al., 2010: 260). How others regard and comment upon one's appearance and activities establishes and reflects one's sense of belonging and legitimacy (Crossley, 2011). These sensibilities then become internalized so that they start to feel right and appropriate.

Perhaps due to this desire to appear more lifelike, many residents eventually express a strong urge to portray their avatar in a way that aligns as closely as possible to their actual offline body – so as to more truly reflect their authentic inner self, they argue. This phenomenon is particularly demonstrated in Avatar Island, a locale in *Second Life* where one can learn (or purchase tools) to enhance the realistic appearance and animation of one's avatar. As an incentive to

participate in such a process, new residents or visitors who enter the *Second Life* portal through Avatar Island's Welcome Center receive free advice and tutorials on how to create, clothe and animate their avatar, to develop related skills for navigating *Second Life* and free gifts of clothing, hairstyles, sunglasses and other accessories. The flagship service of Avatar Island, however, is the creation of customized avatar 'skins' from a resident's photograph. For the equivalent of US\$10, a resident can upload their photograph to CyberExtruder's⁸ avatar creation system and, seconds later, the company's proprietary software generates a texture of a 'realistic' avatar face, that is, one that more closely approximates an iconic photographic image.

While still reflecting on our own rapidly evolving transformations, the authors undertook a series of interviews in *Second Life* in Avatar Island with regular residents. While all residents had experimented with their avatar's appearance in *Second Life*, some had decided to undergo complete 'facial transformations' in *Second Life* through the CyberExtruder software. They aimed to achieve what they regarded as a more 'authentic' appearance, one that was more closely aligned to their actual image in their offline lives. Sometimes this meant having their earlier avatar persona age several years, gain weight or have wrinkles. As we were also attempting to understand both the technological and cultural processes at work in such transformations, our discussions often became more like workshops, so the interviewees would discuss issues and work with one of our research students, Kyal Tripodi, to achieve the particular look they were seeking.

One of our first interviewees was Jack Ives, aka Captain Borgnine, one of the owners and founders of Avatar Island. His idea for Avatar Island came from his recognition of a niche gap in the market. He had already developed a successful software business, but realized that there was a growing emotional and pragmatic need for the personalization of transactions in virtual spaces. As he pointed out, many corporate meetings are global and online; participants want to be able to 'recognize each other' on site as this 'breeds a certain amount of respect for the position they occupy'. There was a greater wish: 'to eschew anonymity in favour of authenticity', he explained, to blur the actual self with the *Second Life* counterpart.

CyberExtruder developed a software process for personalization services that was relatively cheap and deliberately designed to be very fast and simple to use on a DIY basis. However, as we pointed



Figure 5. Avatar Island, before and after.

out above, a large part of the appeal of participating in 3DVE is to feel *immersed* in another world, through a range of aural and visual cues. This also indicates that it is not enough to look iconically like one's offline self but one has to *feel* the appropriate emotions of such a transformation too. The Avatar Island transformation process therefore also provides the theatrics of a process of facial and body transformation as though it were cosmetic surgery actually physically taking place in *Second Life* (even though of course the changes occur through software on a remote commuter server). The avatar enters a hall with outer as well as inner rooms where the 'operation' will take place. The outer rooms have a number of small kiosks (rather like photo kiosks that one might find in any shopping mall). These kiosks (see Figure 1) offer the opportunity to 'try before you buy', providing a simpler experience of seeing how one might superimpose one's photographic likeness onto one's avatar. The avatar sits inside the kiosk and, when a green button is pressed, the outer doors of the kiosk close. The individuals in actual life then watch through the default third-person camera view described above, as their avatars are

subjected to exaggerated doses of 'X-rays' or 'microwaves' (represented by flashes of light onto a skeleton). When their avatar emerges the owners are asked to send their actual life photo to a URL and this will then allow them to pick up 'their new avatar face' through their email.

This speedy 'fairground' version of the process is enhanced when the avatar walks into the main rooms of the CyberExtruder facility. These rooms are made to appear to offer the experience of being in a cosmetic surgeon's waiting room or office, with chairs, information and 'before and after' posters (see Figure 5).

The use of 'before and after' photographic posters ironically reflects the ways in which cosmetic surgery is still often advertised in actuality, referencing a form of 'hermeneutic magic' or fantasy, where the 'processes of creation are obscured . . . [and] signs of labour are eliminated' (Jones, 2008: 16). At the same time, here too the avatar is submitted to a display of extreme theatrics. The main operating theatre where the process takes place in Avatar Island presents as a combination of fairground sideshow spectacular involving complex technology and a gothic 'mad scientist' laboratory experiment.

Two large circular machines await the avatar as it enters the room, with surgical benches protruding from the middle of each (see Figure 6). Offline, the individual pays the required Linden Dollars and sends a copy of a simple photograph to the CyberExtruder business to show the customized face she wants to appear on her avatar. The avatar is then instructed by a text message to lie down on the bench, head towards the centre of the machine.

At this point of the process the CyberExtruder has taken control, for the residents find their perspective has automatically been reverted to mouse POV meaning that they now share the same point of view as their avatar of the 'medical' procedure.⁹ The result for the resident is a feeling of 'loss of control' similar to what would be experienced in actual life during a medical procedure such as an X-ray or an MRI; just as in actual environments, the agency is clearly handed over to the expert, whether the doctor, the adviser or the life coach (see Jones, 2008). The machine then rotates like an MRI machine, while a putty-like substance lands on the patient's face (see Figure 7). Again, this is experienced from the first-person point of view of the avatar having the 'treatment' although another avatar can 'watch' the procedure on the patient from the camera POV. Once the circuit has been completed, the avatar rises from the



Figure 6. CyberExtruder.



Figure 7. Denlee on the CyberExtruder.

bench, the default POV returns and the resident is informed that they will receive their avatar's new face by email.

Obviously, the look, the sounds and the movements of the operation are all designed to be bizarre and humorous; the theatrical

process, which has absolutely nothing to do with the actual method of transformation, is a marketing strategy, necessary to appeal to the consumer and potential corporate client with high-tech sound effects, the deliberately excessive gothic images of dark humour and the first-person perspective enhancing the process of mimetic excess, the 'mimetic self-awareness' referred to above (Taussig, 1993: 252).

My Avatar/My Self

At the time of our interviews in 2009, once the resident had uploaded the ideal photo (front view with no lighting), the system would then generate a face texture on the web server by combining the photo with a generic template. A jpg image would then be sent to the user, who would upload this to appear in *Second Life* so that it could be 'worn' as a skin. Sometimes the textures need extra 'tweaking' to fit the avatar properly. For example, Lady Kat, one of our interviewees described below, was concerned that her first skin attempt did not fit perfectly, complaining 'my nose looks crooked'. Lady Kat's use of the possessive pronoun 'my' to describe her avatar's nose illustrates the common slippage in discourse when residents talk about their avatars: it is as though the *Second Life* persona were a realistic portrait or mirror image of themselves.

Lady Kat and her colleague Brice Fellini were keen to try the CyberExtruder and both were willing to discuss their experiences and reasons for wanting facial transformations. We first met Lady Kat, the avatar persona of Katherine Levine, through her message posted to the *Second Life* education listserv, and were intrigued by her request for advice. She wanted to transform her avatar to *feel* more authentically aligned with her offline self. As Katherine explained:

I have been enjoying both exploring *Second Life* as Lady Kat Tigerpaw and reading all I can about using *Second Life* as an educational tool. I plan to bring my current master level class to *Second Life* on an exploratory adventure sometime later in the semester. I also plan to use *Second Life* to train coaches. I love my avatar, but also feel that it is time to move closer to my RL identity. I am 70 and sexy; Lady Kat is young and sexy. Someone said if sent a picture, they could make an avatar resemble the picture. (Levine, 2008)

Wood responded to Katherine's request, providing details of the CyberExtruder service, offering to assist in Lady Kat's 'ageing

makeover'. Through a snowball effect, we were then introduced to two other respondents: Katherine introduced us to her friend Michael Roberts aka Brice Fellini, and also asked us to help her spouse whose *Second Life* name was RamBam.

All three individuals stated that they wanted to align their represented avatar selves more closely to their actual lives for 'professional' reasons. Katherine explained that as a personal 'life coach' or psychological trainer she felt it was very important to appear as close to her actual appearance as possible to develop an honest, trusting relationship with her clients. Despite her pleasure in exploring alternative subjectivities, she felt her actual bodily appearance and identity represented who she really felt she was. Any other representation in the virtual suggested that she was being less true to her 'core' sense of personhood. The role of the face was central here. As novelist Milan Kundera reminds us in his novel *Immortality*, our identities are inextricably intertwined with how our faces look to ourselves and to others (Kundera, 1991, cited in Kemp, 2002: 5). Commonsense understandings of physiognomic discourses frequently frame understandings of moral character, with particular facial attributes often being 'the focus of trustworthiness' (Pearl, 2010: 222).¹⁰ Michael (aka Brice Fellini) affirmed this; he explained how, as an educator, he wanted his primary avatar to look more like his embodied self in actuality in order to maintain authority and respect with his students.¹¹ Like Lady Kat, when he considered the CyberExtruder makeover, he was very particular about how closely the avatar should resemble himself and his face in actual life.

RamBam was the least enthusiastic about transforming his appearance. It was Lady Kat who had really wanted his avatar to look older and appear more aligned with his 'actual' body. Yet when it came to accepting a compromise, he too was quite adamant that the avatar needed to look more aligned with how he perceived his embodied self to be in actuality. While he was agreeable to participating in our study, he was quite insistent that he did not want the image of his new avatar to be shown publicly (on our website or in any of our publications) until he was happy with it. We never reached that point, which is particularly telling given his apparent ambivalence about the need to change in any case.

‘Can I Borrow Your Face for a Minute?’

Once the new texture (skin) is created the avatar has to ‘wear the new skin’ to take on his or her actual appearance. However, the alignment is often not quite right because, as explained above, the individual really needs a very specific type of passport shot which should be completely ‘front on’ and with no lighting effects, or, in the words of Jack Ives, ‘the more unflattering the better’, to be effective. Since all three participants did not have perfect shots, our own research student, Kyal, offered to edit the textures created by the CyberExtruder to get them to a point where Lady Kat and Brice were happy. However, even after editing the textures, there is still a degree of adjustment required on the avatar body to align things correctly. As Brice was not experienced in such technicalities, Kyal offered ‘to wear’ the created texture on his own avatar to tweak it for him. So they were in effect exchanging Brice’s processed photographic face to make it fit more realistically on an avatar. Kyal’s request to RamBam stated so unselfconsciously – ‘Can I borrow your face for a minute?’ – exemplified for the authors the paradox and complexity of online subjectivity; the seamless, continuous and effortless switching from *Second Life* to actuality, from self to other within the conversations and relationships on and offline that occurs despite the sense of intense affinity our respondents expressed towards their own bodily appearance and their inner self.

Concluding Remarks: Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?

With the caveat that our findings cannot necessarily be generalized into other 3DVEs, our experiences in *Second Life* reveal a number of insights. First, many individuals struggle to constitute their avatar as an authentic representation of their offline self, even while they see their inner self as being beyond bodily form and even while they are playing with alternative images and personae. Second, this need for verifying authenticity seems to be underpinned by a desire for belonging, the measure of legitimacy itself is assessed, evaluated and monitored by the individual’s own moral standards – implying integrity, coherence and honesty – and reinforced and verified by others in the social online network.

Yet, of course, the very concept of authenticity here is complex and slippery; in *Second Life*, most people in one’s avatar community

only really know and judge each other by their performances *in world*. The actual identity behind the avatar is often protected. In many cases the identity performed through the avatar may be extremely consistent in this particular environment but this persona may be far different in other online or offline worlds. Sometimes the different worlds are deliberately allowed to coincide and overlap with the different identities or 'inner selves' reinforcing one another even if the appearances of the bodies do not appear similar at all.

We began this article by posing a question about the relationship between the physical body and the virtual body online. Contemporary accounts of what it means to be embodied have moved beyond the material, psychological and phenomenological into the virtual and affective. Our bodies are no longer defined 'by an outer skin envelope or surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 2). In other words, it seems the key to understanding identity creation and maintenance in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* might lie less in comparing the actual and virtual worlds, but rather in the power of affect, 'a body's capacity to affect and be affected' (2010: 2) particularly by sensory representations.

Recent research highlights the ongoing paradox of identity formation in late modernity; the desire to claim a particular, distinctive identity while at the same time wishing to critique and relinquish any claims to a fixed, stable notion of self (Guerlac, 2006; Hayles, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006; Leaver, 2004; Lenoir, 2002; Munster, 1999; Williams and Bendelow, 1996). Our own excursions into *Second Life* suggested that this 'doubleness of identity politics' (Elliott, 2001: 158), as in all other forms of contemporary 'makeover culture' (Jones, 2008), is not necessarily progressive and does not guarantee new insights or success in terms of agency and stability. Furthermore, as Braidotti has pointed out, the emergence of 'a new transversal subjectivity, which takes others as constitutive moments in the construction of a common plane of becoming' (2006: 189) means a shift in understanding a self that is simultaneously constituted through multiple power relationships 'along multiple axes' (2006: 266), both human and non-human.

In human relationships, as we have seen in *Second Life*, the face is central to our understanding of those power relationships and the power of affect. As Silvan Tomkins notes, 'affects are ... facial

responses that communicate and motivate at once both publicly outward to the other and backward and inwards to the one who smiles or cries or frowns or sneers or otherwise expresses his affects' (Tomkins, 1966: vii, cited in Gibbs, 2010: 191). This leads us back to understand that, when we struggle to realize what it means to be human, to be embodied, especially when considering virtual worlds, we have to accept with Massumi (2002) that we need to begin with process not position, what is possible rather than what is, the processes of affect being 'potential and emergent' (Clough, 2010: 209; see also Grossberg, 2010). What a study of human interaction in *Second Life* seems to offer, then, is on the one hand an articulation of the broadened range of possible affective states and subjectivities, new ways of understanding what it means to be embodied, new ways of rethinking and transforming current understandings of the material body. On the other hand, as the authors discovered in their excursions in *Second Life*, while such a request highlights the very heady possibilities of a 'body without borders', defined 'by zones of intensity, thresholds, degrees and fluxes' (Deleuze, 2006: 130), we still seem to be obsessed with the way our faces and physical bodies can demonstrate our sense of uniqueness. From this perspective, Kyal's unselfconscious request to 'borrow' another's face 'for a minute' suggests a far more complex and paradoxical request than appears at first sight.

Notes

1. This project was supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
2. Throsby (2008: 118) points out that this discourse of the re-born 'new me' is similar to the usual tropes of bodily transformations being 'normalized' after cosmetic surgery or gender reassignment surgery (see, for example, Jones, 2008; Prosser, 1998).
3. As in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the 'event' in this context refers to the coalescence of experiences, which become how one perceives actuality (Manning, 2009: 43).

4. Avatars in *Second Life* often appear as ‘furries’, which have an anthropomorphic appearance – usually representing a form of hybrid human–other mammal, reptile or bird.
5. A sense of ownership of one’s avatar is also directly related to the level of monetary and emotional investment as well as the amount of time the owner has spent creating the avatar. Within the world of *Second Life*, as in many 3DVEs, this level of investment translates into social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The degree of dedication and knowledge demonstrates a corresponding sense of belonging and validated membership within the online community. This is also a reason why an attack on one’s avatar is felt so acutely.
6. Several of our interviews were with professional *Second Life* photographers. See Bloustien and Wood (2009).
7. At this stage we were not concerned with making our avatars resemble or align with representations of our real-life (offline) selves but rather just to appear more recognizably naturalistic and humanoid in terms of appearance, posture and gait – even if still much younger and idealized!
8. See: <http://www.cyberextruder.com/> (accessed August 2009).
9. Unfortunately, the usual photographic screenshot does not enable a POV avatar shot to illustrate this as the default view is the third-person camera shot.
10. In many cultures, coarseness or prominence of particular facial features are often used to indicate deficits in character. Skin colour, body weight, disfigurement or disability often serve as a cultural shorthand, shot through with ideologies of class and race, in fiction as well as in actual life, to indicate lack of intelligence, lack of moral fortitude, unreliability, sloth and untrustworthiness.
11. In his interview, though, he also indicated that he was very keen to explore multiple avatar identities (a female cabaret star from the German Weimar period was his favourite).

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