Journal of
•Virtual Worlds Research

Volume 1, Number 3. Culture of Virtual Worlds.

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Knee-High Boots and Six-Pack Abs:
Autoethnographic Reflections on Gender and Technology in Second Life

By Delia Dumitrica and Georgia Gaden, University of Calgary, Canada

Abstract

In this paper, we explore the experience and performance of gender online in Second Life, currently one of the most popular virtual world platforms. Based on two collaborative autoethnographic projects, we propose that gender has to be explored at the intersection between our own situated perspective and the vision embedded in the social and technical infrastructure of the virtual world. For us, the visual element of a 3D world further frames the representation and performance of gender, while technical skill becomes a crucial factor in constructing our ability to play with this performance. As we recollect and interrogate our own experiences in SL, we argue that the relation between gender and virtual worlds is a complex and multifaceted one, proposing our positioned account of experiencing this relation. It is critical, we suggest, that studies of mediated experience in virtual worlds take into account the position of the researcher in 'real' life (IRL) as well as the dominant discourses of the environment they are immersed in. In this we must also be critical, of ourselves, our assumptions, as well as the environment itself.

Keywords: autoethnography; gender performance; Second Life; virtual worlds.

Knee-High Boots and Six-Pack Abs:
Autoethnographic Reflections on Gender and Technology in Second Life

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On October 2007, we attended John Lester's engaging presentation on the popular virtual environment Second Life (SL) at the Association of Internet Researchers annual conference. Lester came as a representative of Linden Labs, the company who created and who maintains SL. In his presentation, he demonstrated examples of the potential for education, collaboration, and research and creativity in SL. Here was a virtual reproduction of the Sistine Chapel – unlike in real life however, you could fly and perch yourself close to the famous ceiling – followed by recreations of ancient Egyptian temples created, as Lester pointed out, faithful to the archaeological suggestions of their 'real life' remains. "SL inhabitants," said Lester, "don't recreate the physical world, nor something abstract. They create Alice in Wonderland, sort of oasis of the surreal." As scholars interested in deconstructing social categories, we were quite curious about the representation of gender in such an 'oasis of the surreal.' Later the same day, an entire panel devoted to SL scholarship further piqued our interest. Would this world that excited academics and technology advocates alike bring us a new way of thinking about and performing our gender?

Without a specific purpose or goal for its inhabitants, SL is consistently positioned as a world, as a creative environment - "less a game than, well, a second life, and the 'player' is the resident or citizen with limitless choices as to how he or she wants to spend time, rather than a competitor on some virtual global playing field" (Ludlow & Wallace 2007, p. 10) (see also McKeon & Wyche, 2005). SL boasts some 13 million created accounts of which over a million logged in the last two months as of April 2008 (SL Economic Statistics Website). The educational potential of SL has been one of the main products marketed by Linden Labs, enticing educators and students to use the world for a problem-solving, hands-on, experiential approach to learning (SL Education & Nonprofit Organizations Website). Several universities were quick to establish a virtual campus,[1] while scholars and professionals alike have become excited about the possibilities afforded by Second Life for learning, teaching, and information sharing (Jennings & Collins, 2007; Maged N., Boulos, K., Hetherington, L., & Wheeler , S., 2007).

It is imperative that we understand more about how bringing educational projects in such environments may impact us, educators and students alike. Looking at women, Judy Wajcman (2004) has argued that we "are orienting and experiencing [our]selves in relation to new media technologies... While there is a thrilling quality to these pioneering endeavours, we must not be hypnotized by the hype that is now ubiquitous" (p. 75). As our online lives become important parts of our social experience and identification processes (Ludlow & Wallace, 2007; Thomas, 2007), just how is gender experienced and how does it intervene in our experience of these environments? In this paper, we explore this dimension from our own perspectives as women,

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[1] For an updated list of educational institutions and organizations with a presence in Second Life, see Second Life Education Wiki, available at http://www.simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life_Education_Wiki (as of April 8, 2008).

academics, and new users with limited experience of online multi-user environments[2] and none at all of SL itself. Our entry point into the world – and thus the criteria with which we created expectations and evaluated our first encounters - was its positioning as a "a real world, only better" (Ondrejka, 2004). We have undertaken a collaborative autoethnographic project in SL, observing how we perceive and perform gender in-world for six months, and then critically investigating these processes. In this paper, we are proposing that our experience of gender in SL lies at the intersection between our situated perspectives, the gendered vision of the socio-technical platform, and the ubiquity of 3D visualizations.

Preparing to think about Gender in Virtual Worlds

Theoretically, we have approached gender in Second Life from a post-structuralist feminist perspective, drawing especially from the work of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and Judy Wajcman. The centrality and complexity of gender in feminist research has been widely discussed (see, just for example, Aslop, Fitzsimmons, & Lennon, 2002; Butler, 1990, 1993; Oakley, 1972, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this paper, we understand gender as being performed through our actions, behaviors, and choices; we *do* gender: "But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented in its production... [gender is conceived of] both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating the one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Thus, gender is 'achieved, not given' (Eller, 2003, p. 90) within specific social circumstances and power arrangements. Judith Butler (1990) points out that the signs of gender are performed in response to our acceptance of shared discursive constructions. Gendered actions are, according to Butler, not the expression of an "internal core or substance" (p. 85). We might take them as such (which might contribute to their power), but in our understanding they are rather ways of positioning the self within a specific social environment. In such contexts, to be successful in the execution of 'femaleness'/'maleness' requires that we are competent in the discursive practices (Foucault, 1972) which establish what counts as 'appropriate' for our gender identity. Furthermore, as Butler also maintains, these shared understandings and conventions of masculinity and femininity, and the binary itself, cannot be separated from sexuality. Butler argues that gender is produced and operates within a heterosexual matrix (1990) or hegemony (1993) where masculinities and femininities are produced and interpreted in this context, thus placing queer sexualities and gender identities on the margins, in the realm of the 'other.'

Interrogating gender performance is thus connected to interrogating the discursive practices within which gender comes to be normatively constructed, as well as our own position in relation to such discourses. In the case of virtual worlds, where the social interaction takes place within a technologically-mediated environment, such discursive practices are part of the social/technical infrastructure (that is, the software and the social world it enables) and it is important to consider how particular visions of gender and sexuality are embodied by this infrastructure.

However, it is perhaps even more important that we recognize how we approach this infrastructure from our own situated perspectives – in our particular cases, as white, middle-

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[2] The researchers have some knowledge of Multi-User Dungeons or Domains (MUD) and MUD Object Oriented (MOO), and some second-hand knowledge of Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing Games MMRPG).

class, able-bodied, heterosexual, European, women, and professionally as academics – and how this situatedness frames our interpretation(s) of the environment. Though we do not claim it is possible to fully or simultaneously occupy all of these positions (Haraway, 1988), a self-reflective awareness of these (partial) positions is central to our efforts to understand our own processes of observing and performing gender in SL. We argue that these situated perspectives frame our interpretation of a new (to us) environment, helping us to make sense of, and act within it.

When it comes to the social/technical infrastructure, it is important to recognize that worlds such as SL are themselves the product of particular discursive practices around gender. Feminist scholars have described technology as both liberating from and reinforcing of traditional gender binaries and boundaries. Donna Haraway's (1991) metaphor of the cyborg opens up the space of imagining 'alternatives' and of re-thinking agency in terms of gender identity. The cyborg itself is neither human nor machine; and, as the pronouns indicate, 'it' is neither male nor female. The metaphor speaks to the idea of challenging the binary gender designation, of resisting the identity, status and actions ascribed by virtue of being placed under the label of 'woman' or 'man' and thus recovering agency. Haraway's cyborg collapses the boundaries between individual and technology, and in so doing, it shows "the arbitrariness and constructed nature of what is considered to be the norm(al)" (Prins, 1995, p. 360). Yet, the cyborg is also ambiguous: it simultaneously brings forward the confusion of the boundaries between nature/ technology, human/animal, male/female, and it is a final control over our bodies. Thus, the cyborg encompasses "permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (Haraway, 1991, p. 154).

Are cyberworlds such cyborg spaces? Popularizing efforts have positioned SL as "a new way of being" (Montagne, 2007), implying a universe of possibilities in terms of identity constructions and social interactions. For example, Sherry Turkle describes a text-based virtual environment where there appears to be scope for escape from the gender binary: users did not *have* to assign a gender to their online persona (Turkle, 1995, p. 210; also Bruckman, 1993; Danet, 1996). Since identity was composed textually in these spaces, there were opportunities for gender swapping through textual cues. Yet, "passing" online was more complex and difficult than a simple character-description: "To pass as a woman for any length of time requires understanding how gender inflects speech, manner, the interpretation of experience" (Turkle, 1995, p. 212). To a certain extent, this gender swapping "encourages reflection on the way ideas about gender shape our expectations" (p. 213). In spite of this potential, Turkle *is* cautious about utopian visions of disembodied gender experience since "to a certain extent, knowledge is inherently experiential, based on a physicality that we each experience differently" (p. 238; also Kendall, 1999). In the case of gaming, female characters evolved from being passive battle trophies to be won by male contestants to full contestants themselves. Interestingly, the first female avatars were built using patches designed to modify the appearance of male avatars (Schleiner, 2004). Considering the first pre-packaged female 3D game avatars, like for example Lara Croft, Anne-Marie Schleiner (2001) notes that they fell into (perhaps predictable) types of "ultra-fem drag queens, level-headed female soldiers, and sexy doll automatons" (p. 129; also O'Riordan, 2006).

The problematic potential of virtual spaces is a common theme in much literature on gender and technology/virtuality. As virtual spaces have been popularized, they have been both celebrated as an opportunity for liberation from conventional gender roles and crtiticized as

white–male shaped spaces, filled with pornography, sexualization, and increased commodification. While the liberating cyborg metaphor remains an appealing ideal, Judy Wajcman (2004) warns that it "risk[s] fetishizing new technologies" (p. 8). Instead, Wajcman recommends that we focus on the mutual shaping processes between gender discourses and technology, from design practices to the meaning technologies acquire and their everyday uses. In the case of SL, this mutual shaping of gender discourses and technology is most visible in the production, customization, and interaction of 3D mobile avatars. This creates, writes Stephen Webb, "a world of appearances" (Webb, 2001, p. 586). Indeed, in discussion with Akela Talamasca, (former) Second Life Insider writer, Sarah "Intellagirl" Robbins[3] comments on her shock when Akela used a different avatar "it's not *you* … when I read your name, I associate it with a 6.5" wolf, like that's what I *see*" (Robbins Podcast, 2007). For our project, then, we were especially interested in the visual presentation of gender and our interaction with the platform of SL in its construction. How, we wondered, would we *see* ourselves and others in SL? How powerful would the avatar be for us as a presentation of gender? .

Collaborative Autoethnography as a Form of Situated Knowledges

To address the intersection between the discursive practices around gender in SL, and our own situated perspectives, we have opted for autoethnography as a method which can connect both threads (see also Sparkes 2002; Back, 2004). Autoethnography starts from the researcher's own experience, connecting the story of the world that it presents to the wider power networks. Firmly anchored in the qualitative research paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Ellis, 2004), autoethnography basically consists of a reflexive effort to connect "the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2004). In this, autoethnography shares the same epistemological underpinnings as Haraway's (1988) situated knowledges: our stories not only (re)construct positioned and contextual identities, but also reveal the connections between individual and social levels (Stapleton & Wilson, 2004; Sparkes, 2002). For Denzin and Lincoln (2002), this method is characterized by an explicit political (and thus ethical) project - that of empowerment, simultaneously a critical perspective and an action. The overlapping of the position of the researcher and that of the subject of research brings to light in a more transparent manner the fact that "we are always present in our texts, no matter how we try to suppress ourselves. We are always writing in particular contexts" (Richardson, 2002, p. 41).

Autoethnography remains controversial in academic work precisely because it is rooted within a situated-perspective approach; and as such it has been accused of being too personal, narcissistic, and thus not reliable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Sparkes, 2000; Richardson, 2002). Such accusations often stem from a different epistemological position, one concerned more with the reliability and validity of data then with its capacity to tell us something about the way in which we make sense of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Seale, 2004). Autoethnography's controversial position is interesting considering that its close relative – ethnography – has been a widely used method in social sciences. In fact, virtual ethnographies constitute a legitimate and well documented form of research (for instance, Turkle, 1995; Hamman, 1997; Dicks & Mason, 1998; Hine, 1998, 2000; McLelland, 2002; Schaap, 2002; Thomas, 2007; Isabella, 2007; Rybas & Gajjala, 2007; Teli, Pisanu, & Hakken 2007; Orton-

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[3] Who is intellagirl, A self-described "academic, a writer, a speaker, a marketer, a mom, and a geek," Sarah "intellagirl" Robbins has been active studying and teaching in SL for several years. Retrieved September, 2008 from <http://www.intellagirl.com/?page_id=2>

Johnson, 2007). Virtual ethnographies of identity and gender constructions in online worlds (Turkle, 1995; McLelland, 2002; Schaap, 2002; Thomas, 2007) have looked at a variety of text-based and 3D virtual worlds (Danet, 1998; McLelland, 2002; Schaap, 2002; Isabella, 2007). In virtual ethnographic research, the researcher immerses herself into the online world, observing, describing, and interpreting the "relationships between social practices and the systems of meaning in a particular cultural milieu" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 16). The main difference in the case of autoethnography is that the researcher does not enter and study people in a new milieu from the outside – the researcher is the insider. The object of study is the experience of the researcher, which is subsequently analyzed in terms of its connection to the wider socio-political context. With autoethnography, researchers focus on their own experiences, feelings and circumstances.[4] The examination of one's own situated position has an explicit political aim of looking for the power configurations articulated by that experience and context. Taking oneself as the basis of knowledge means recuperating the realm of subjective experience, including rationalizations, embodied feelings and instinctive reactions as part of our making sense of the world. The subsequent critical analysis of this subjective experience consists of a constant questioning in relation to the socio-political context and power structures the researcher aims to challenges: why did I see/ react/ feel this way. By being explicitly political and partial, autoethnography sheds light onto the interaction between subjective understandings and wider contexts. It also challenges the idea of a totalizing form of knowledge, recuperating the individual experience as both of locus of power relations and a valid sense-making process.[5]

Our collaborative autoethnographic project does not claim to speak for all user-perspectives or experiences of gender in SL. And, as we have mentioned above, we partly inhabit and speak from perspectives that we characterize as those of new SL users, as well as white/middle-class/academic/women (among others). As we will explain further, these positions become intertwined in complex ways during our time in SL. Through our colaborative autoethnographic project we tried to recuperate these positions and critically reflect on their implications. The collaborative dimension furthered our critical self-reflexive process by allowing us to explore and compare each other's understanding and performance of gender in the virtual world. As Davis and Ellis (2008) remark, the dialogue in the collaboration brings a plurality of visions not only in the story, but also in the researcher's sensitivity towards the data. Thus, we asked ourselves to what extent our personal contexts became significant in the way in which we experienced the world, providing us psychological comfort in tense situations and shaping our own perspectives (Collinson, 2005). Collaborative work allowed us to acknowledge the ambiguity, ambivalence and multifaceted dimension of lived experience. In dialogue throughout the research process (so, during our explorations of SL and our analysis afterwards) we found that we challenged and provoked each other to recognize the context(s) and significance of our observations and feelings. This prompted us to interrogate our individual interpretations while at the same time facilitating the emergence of our shared interpretations. This collaborative reflexivity, we argue, is extremely valuable. In examining virtual worlds, we never come to the stage as blank pages. We carry with us not only our positions, but also our interactions and our close environment. Through our autoethnographic collaboration, we were able to bring those to the forefront of the research process itself. In the analysis, we present a

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[4] Thus, due to the nature of our method, we cannot speak on behalf of other SL users. Our experience of other SL users remained mediated by our research interest and by our experience of gender discussed in this paper.

[5] Since the focus of this paper is on gender performance, the authors are discussing the implications of using autoethnography in virtual environments in a separate forthcoming paper.

unitary story; yet, within this story, we have tried to equally preserve the different experiences, feelings and questions.

Autoethnography – and in particular collaborative projects – have a lot to offer to understanding online environments in general, and gender online in particular. Such a method is more faithful to the hypertextual construction of the internet, allowing the researcher to reflect on her own path in relation to other available paths by following her own interests; it also allows her to move in a manner that is neither uniform nor linear, and thus fits better with the linked nature of online spaces. Furthermore, by allowing researchers to compare their own paths through the Internet, as well as the paths through which they reach certain conclusions about online worlds, collaborative autoethnographies provide 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) which incorporate not only the context of experiences, but also the feelings and expectations associated with them.

Gender and Technology in Second Life

We joined Second Life in November 2007. After each of us created their own avatar, we started our individual journeys, keeping a field journal. A month later, we met in SL and started visiting places (mostly popular places listed in the SL place search function, but also some educational places) and doing things together. Although both of us rely heavily on ICTs in our professional and personal lives, this heavy use does not necessarily equate great technical know-how. Indeed, our first encounters with technology in SL were fraught with hiccups as at first our laptops failed to run SL for various reasons (insufficiently powerful graphic cards, firewalls), delaying our entry into the world. Joining SL was a learning experience: now, as we revisit our journals, we notice how, over the research period, we both moved from initial feelings of frustration and despair to, once familiar with the environment, taking for granted our existence in the virtual world.

In an effort to make sense of the complex way in which gender and technology become interlinked in SL, we have closely re-read our experiences as we recorded them in our diaries. From this re-reading, and the discussions that followed, we propose three dimensions of gender performance dynamics. The first of these is to think about how our own gendered vision(s) helped shape our expectations, behaviours, and ultimately responses to SL. Next we consider how the SL platform creates a framework which suggests or at least facilitates particular (gendered) behaviour for users. This part of our discussion is framed by two main problematics: how the platform frames our options/choices, and the role of the visual element in the production and reproduction of (an apparently) binary gender normativity.

An inescapable gendered perspective?

As much as we wanted to push the boundaries of the traditional gender binary in SL, it soon became obvious that this was not really possible for us. Part of the reason for this had to do with the platform of the world itself (further discussed in the next section), the other part of the story was our own positioning as women and our own internalization of patriarchal systems[6] which we, as women, were familiar with. In the comfort zones of our daily lives, we might not

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[6] Arguably, the two researchers grew up in different geographical contexts. Patriarchal systems might not necessarily be identical, but they share the same macro systemic distribution of power (see Relke, 2000, for a discussion of patriarchy on the contemporary feminist research agenda).

think of ourselves as (or associate our gender identity) with being vulnerable or weak (and, indeed, we are aware of our privilege in speaking from this standpoint). We are openly critical of patriarchal systems. However, in the new environment of SL, we felt a discomfort and a fear that was both familiar and less so:

"It was a feeling of being completely alone in strange surroundings… I was scared" (Georgia, Nov 15, 2007).

"Should I be a woman? This world is unknown to me as a woman, I suddenly feel afraid and vulnerable." (Delia, Nov. 6, 2007).

Georgia, who opted for a 'female' avatar, felt as if she didn't "want to prolong the interaction" with other avatars she encountered. "I'm not sure why. I guess …I don't want to get myself into any kind of entanglement with anyone, no matter how innocent" (Nov 17, 2007). She avoided other avatars, moving away if they approached, preferring to explore alone. Delia opted for another strategy of coping with her own fears of being in an unknown situation: she gender-swapped her avatar. "Let's go in as a man," she told herself. "If Second Life is about experimenting..., why not going for something different?" (November 6, 2007). But, as she came to realize during her journeys, the experimentation in question was not about indulging in a ludic pleasure (Jimroglu, 2006) or identity tourism (Nakamura, 2006). She too opted for a male avatar out of fear: the fear of being woman in a world where she didn't know what that would entail, but where her (real) life experiences suggested the particular possibility of being rendered a sexualized object.

Our circumstances, as well as our situated perspectives on gender framed our process of becoming familiar with this world that was new for us. A certain recognition that the online gaming space was traditionally male-dominated, and an awareness of past experiences of women being targets of hate-speech and flaming in such environments (see for example Kendall, 1999) accompanied our first steps into SL. Furthermore, both of us were in committed relationships at the time of the research, and felt that we didn't want to invite any flirtatious behaviour. Writing in her diary about her reluctance to interact with other avatars Georgia thought about this:

"I'm conscious of not wanting to offend my partner... I worry that he will worry that I am doing something inappropriate and I also worry that other avatars might act in a flirtatious way with me, which I certainly don't want to invite (thought the whole world seems so hyper-sexual to me, that this might be difficult to avoid)" (November 17, 2007).

In SL, we brought with us fears that women are and will always be targets of harassment in places that lack formal and protected gender equality policies. Being in an unknown setting – and particularly a gendered and sexualized setting, as we will explain further – heightened our feelings of fear and vulnerability. This interpretation, we feel, is informed by experiences of being objectified and sexualized according to, and lifetimes of adherence to, the conventions of heterosexual gender identity. Our situated perspectives in seeing the kind of sexualized world that we did were mediated by our understanding of sex/sexiness in a patriarchal context: the fear of being approached – and who knows, maybe even used – for sexual reasons dominated our first encounters with the world (see figure 1).We also thought about the possibility that the position of sexualized objects may be empowering (see for example the case of Gorean slaves and masters in SL, described in Ludlow & Wallace 2007), this was not what we were looking for.

Figure 1: One of the early images Delia encountered in a shopping location.

Later, in one of the (face-to-face) discussions which peppered our in-world adventures, we pondered our feelings: why did we assume that we would be inviting sexual attention? Why this fear of being treated like an object especially when our avatar was female? Thinking about the role of our situated perspectives and the weight of the norms and conventions we adhere to (as well as those we like to think that we challenge) in shaping our interpretation of SL, and our responses to the environment, has been vital. Straight away, almost as soon as we (quite literally) found our feet in SL, we noticed how the avatars we identified as female had big breasts, slim waists and long legs, while the 'male' avatars had pumped six-packs and pectorals. And this was not liberating for us – quite on the contrary, we recognized this as a reproduction of, and we felt again trapped by, the expectations and norms of female/male beauty familiar to us in real life.

In an act of revolt – which could equally be construed as an act of self-protection – Georgia changed her avatar's looks, filling out her waist, reducing her breasts, and trying to make her as androgynous as possible. Soon enough, she wrote in her diary that she felt like "an interloper. I didn't belong in my free/mismatched/un-'sexy' clothes... I felt like such a loser. In a virtual world!" (Feb 1, 2008). This seemed to be an interpretation which spanned contexts - from a beach party scenario to a scholarly discussion group. Across these sites we observed similar styling for the avatars we encountered and felt similar pressures to 'fit in.'

Indeed, it was at a discussion group that Delia noticed that Georgia's newly shaped androgynous avatar looked so different from all the others: "They were all skinnier, with customized clothing, hair, skins... Rude looked dumpy" (April 3, 2008). Looks – and particularly bodies – are significant mechanisms for social integration: we are positioned as male or female according to our visible physical features, and we are judged as feminine/masculine based on our abilities to exhibit and perform the cues associated with them. We carried over these norms and criteria for successful performance of 'femalness'/ 'maleness' in our SL journeys. Living as women, we discipline our bodies through (culturally contingent) diets, cosmetics, clothing and accessories (as discussed in Bartky, 1990, p.65). In SL we found ourselves not only interpreting but also evaluating our own SL bodies, and those of others, through the same norms. At a university site in SL, Delia encountered another academic doing research in SL and was struck by the disparity between the avatar's appearance and her understanding of 'appropriate' professorial presentation: "I think that I wouldn't want to interact with my professors dressed like this, real or not…if I'd be a male student, I'd be quite enticed by her looks, short skirt, short top, big boobs, long legs…" (Delia, April 3, 2008). In this way we policed our own, and others', self-presentation while we were in SL, finding that the ubiquity of bare breasts, legs, and tight revealing clothing sparked both a fear of sexual objectification for ourselves but also a response of sexual objectification towards others.

As we became used to the world, our critical interest in gender issues gradually diminished. We no longer paid attention to the naked bodies everywhere; we stopped noticing the enhanced breasts or pectorals. The world became naturalized, and our fear diminished. We had learned where to go, how to interact with the environment, and what to expect in most situations. We went on simply living our Second Life, as we now had the knowledge and the skills vital for keeping us out of 'trouble.' Our own gendered vision had helped us make sense of the world and of our positions in it. Yet, as we will further argue, it would be simplistic to claim that our internal worldviews were the only mechanism at work in this meaning-making process. The world itself had something of its own to tell us. In the following sections we will discuss two aspects of this: the choices and options made available to us as participants (especially new participants) in SL, and the power of the visual interface in terms of constructing gender in this environment.

An inescapable gendered platform?

Lisbet Van Zoonen (2002) maintains that gender is an unavoidable, though often invisible issue online (p.11). Yet, as we will try to show in this section, gender was not at all invisible for us in SL. If anything, a heterosexual normativity was suggested to us primarily through the options available for creating and enhacing the avatar, but also through the visual predominance of patriarchal ideals of beauty as stretched by prevailing imagery of the binary male/female. Looking at a text-based virtual world, Jenny Sundén noticed that our online bodies are potentially empowering, given that we can write them any way we want. But she is quick to point out that, while no longer constrained by the physicality of our bodies, our online bodies are "materially grounded in the computer code. Therefore, system developers and programmers have the power to set limits for the type of bodies that can be created" (2003, p. 172).

Gendered choices/ gendered options.

Once signed up for SL, Delia set about constructing her avatar:

"A click here ... and Why materialized on the screen as a gorgeous, six-pack abs, tall and slim, green-eyed, long-blonde hair guy. I would have liked to try something else, but I could not get past the pop-up asking me to decide if my avatar was male or female" (November 2, 6, 2008).

Both of us were surprised during the avatar selection process by how standardized in terms of the gender binary male/female the start-up avatars were. The selection page presented two sets of images: the first a silhouette of two humanoids standing on a beach. On the right, a short-haired, broad shouldered, figure in a wide stance; on the left, a slim (especially tiny-waisted), long-haired figure. To the left of this image, a series of choices for the new resident were arranged in two columns (unlabelled though clearly gendered) 'male' on the right, 'female' on the left. Even the non-humanoid (or 'furry' as they are known in SL) options were clearly distinguishable: the 'female' cat-like figure sporting long eyelashes and a pink nose. Interestingly enough, any other modifications one brings to the avatar start from the standard; equally, whenever SL is being uploaded on users' computers, if the process is rather slow, avatars initially load as the standard, to which add-ons are gradually applied. There is an inescapable feeling here that a particular version of male/female bodies is established within the infrastructure as the norm.

The standard can certainly be modified: "despite offering almost infinite possibilities, the tool to personalize your avatar is very simple to use and allows you to change anything you like, from the tip of your nose to the tint of your skin" ('Create an Avatar,' September 2008) . But 'user-friendliness' and ease of operating those changes are relative. We found our attempts to modify the default avatars using the default tools to be clumsy, resulting in the garb Author 1 found too shabby for her avatar. In the world of appearances, Stephen Webb (2001) observes of environments similar to SL "status…is often accrued by having the best collection of sexually appealing/avatars, or being able to wield the most outrageous or amusing 'gestures' in a room" (p. 586-7). The easiest way of modifying your avatar to scale this social hierarchy is by purchasing – or getting for free - various body parts or clothing items. As SL has developed its own economy, with its own capitalist networks and even a currency exchange market (McKeon & Wyche, 2005; Ludlow & Wallace, 2007; Ondrejka, n.d.), the commodification of avatar features, shapes, and paraphernalia are one of the main economic activities. Yet, in spite of this seemingly great variety of options, the vast majority remain framed by a particular imagination of gendered beauty and desirability (see figure 2).
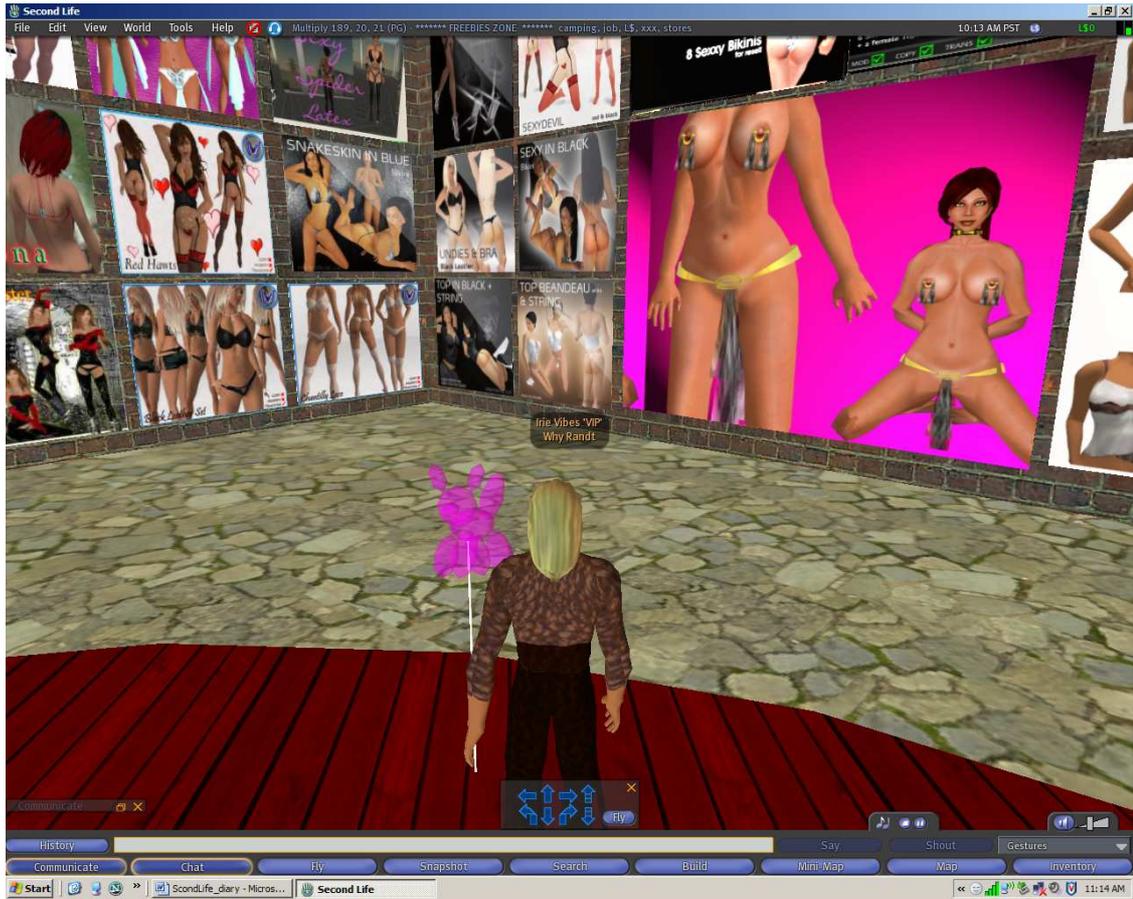
Figure 2: Images of ideal female beauty advertising various body parts for sale.

To move outside of these options requires technical skill and the time to develop it. In this sense, technical skill and economics mediate our available range of choices in constructing and performing gender. In SL, this range seems framed within the male/female binary: body shape and the genitalia are defining markers of your gender. Furthermore, not only looks, but gestures too are gendered (see also Antonijevic, 2008, for a discussion of gendered stereotypes embedded in nonverbal communication scripts). A repository of 'male gestures' was available by default to Delia's avatar, allowing him to boo or laugh like a 'man.' If the repository provided by the creators of the world was not enough, more could be found on the market: scripts for more gestures, for walking styles, for waving your hair in the wind, and so on – all yours to perform automatically within a click or two.

This binary appeared to us embedded in the technological platform, becoming visible in our available standard choices for avatars and in their repositories of gestures. Furthermore, these options have been naturalized through the economic production and exchange of items built for enhancing these options:

I created the avatar by paying attention to the bodily parts that were available – and the fact that they were available is an interesting issue in itself. I wanted my avatar to look cool ... creating your avatar is in fact performing gender stereotypes, materializing them and offering

them to others in the hope that they would be attractive, interesting, appealing (Delia, December 19, 2007).

While Delia thought about the appearance of her avatar, Georgia was embarking on some exploration of the environment with her own avatar, Rude. Not knowing where to go she clicked on the environment map randomly and teleported herself to the destination.[7] During one of her very early visits, she found herself inside a castle of some sort:

"There was nobody there ... I looked around, and the first thing I saw was a table with what looked like stirrups or clamps on it. Right besides it was a shower with the word 'wash' above it. I right-clicked on it and chose the 'sit here' option. Suddenly, Rude was animated, springing into the shower with her legs wide open, the water stream splashing right between them. It was so creepy! I remember gasping out loud. I quickly clicked the 'stand up' button and Rude hopped back out of the shower again" (Georgia, Nov. 15, 2007).

In the days of our avatar creation and early explorations around SL, we were consistently surprised by how disempowered we felt in the world. The above incident put Georgia off returning to SL for several days. As she returned, she gradually figured out the technology behind the 'pose-ball,' the object labelled 'wash' she had clicked on in the castle. Pose-balls are common scripts in SL that temporarily take control over your avatar and animate it in particular positions (like sitting or dancing). In most of the places we visited, they are gendered, with traditional baby colours: pink and blue, and occasionally a neutral yellow. In one place, when Georgia clicked on them, "[her] avatar was posed in a sexy pose on the lounger/rug. Because my avatar is now wearing a skirt you could see up her skirt and see her underwear" (December 3, 2007). In these early days, it felt uncomfortable for her to see her avatar Rude repositioned like this, especially while manoeuvring her was still a struggle at times. In many places, gendered stereotypes seemed to be linked to poses, with female ones being 'demure and clingy,' while male one appearing 'relaxing and upright' (Georgia, January 9, 2008).

Our choices in terms of the appearance and to some extent the behaviour of our avatars (as important, and perhaps the most obvious, sites of gender performance) are heavily mediated by the options presented by the platform at the enrolment stage and by our subsequent level of technical skill/financial outlay in the Second Life environment. Manipulating, or even escaping, very traditional (in a Westernized sense) male/female binary and the stereotypes associated with this, depends largely on our willingness to devote time and monetary resources to learn how to make new skins for ourselves, or to acquire them by purchase or otherwise.

The visual construction of gender. Thinking about gender swapping in text-based virtual worlds, Sherry Turkle (1995) writes that "to pass as a woman for any length of time requires understanding how gender inflects speech, manner, the interpretation of experience" (p. 212). The visual interface in SL, we observed, had a profound effect on our understandings of gender cues such as the ones Turkle mentions and our interpretation of the (gendered) culture of this environment. For both of us, one of our strongest responses to SL was our observation of the prevalence of highly sexualized bodies, or at least bodies where gender is communicated largely through the emphasis on visual signs: large breasts and tiny waists, pectorals and biceps, and clothing which emphasizes these qualities. After a couple of months of exploration Delia

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[7] In Second Life teleportation, as well as flying, are bonuses you can enjoy on behalf of your avatar.

comments "the breasts, the legs and the pectorals – that's what the avatars seem to be all about" (Delia, January 2, 2008). Recalling one of our last meetings in SL together she repeats the observation: "as usual, here it's all about skins, clothes, and body parts… Everywhere I look here I see naked boobs" (Delia, March 28, 2008).

In an attempt to move outside of these prevalent humanoid forms and deciding to take on a 'furry' avatar to coincide with her love of rabbits, Georgia researched furry-friendly areas in SL (using a guidebook to Second Life (Carr & Pond, 2007)), and set out to buy a "rabbit suit" (Georgia, February 7, 2008). The first place she found selling rabbit 'skins' for residents presented very clearly visually gendered options: a 'female' rabbit with large breasts, small waist, and curvaceous hips and a 'male' rabbit with a large penis. Commenting in her diary she noted her surprise "after all, in RL who can tell a male and female rabbit apart without looking very very close?" (Georgia, February 7, 2008). The hunt for a rabbit suit was thereafter abandoned.

As we've discussed already, our own feelings of alienation and inadequacy in SL stemmed largely from how our avatars *looked* rather than from problems navigating or communicating in-world. The larger (as well as individual) economy of SL also rests upon this visual interface. Residents may buy land in world and build (or buy) property that they can furnish and decorate, again by flexing either their building skills or their wallets.[8] As Webb concluded from his study of other virtual environments, the visual appearance of one's avatar is, among other things, a marker of status. Clothing, skins, body parts (including genitalia) are all available for purchase and the manufacture of these items is one way for skilled SL residents to make money.

Gender sells, and the capitalist cycle of production/consumption in SL makes heavy use of this. The huge billboards advertising everything from scripts for sexual intercourse to sexy lingerie made a strong impression on Delia (see figure 3).

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[8] The currency of SL, Linden Dollars is available for purchase in exchange for USD or may be earned by residents in-world.

Figure 3: A bilboard advertising skins and tatoos.

And although advertising is part of our daily routines, the sheer volume of naked bodies and 'sexy' clothes was visually overwhelming. On her way to check out a beach party, Delia couldn't help notice the huge billboards by the entrance featuring female and male naked bodies. The impression they made on her shaped the way she further related to the whole party: "as I entered the beach club, I realized the billboard was not that misplaced. There are only female avatars around and a male DJ. I bet the females are working here, meaning they dance and dress sexy to attract other avatars in this area. I see the dancer on the pole... scantly dressed, her hips swing gently and her hair flows on her face. Three more avatars are dancing, and I'm thinking of their knee-high boots, their big boobs and long hair" (March 12, 2008).

Through our journeys in SL, we often pondered whether what we saw was powerful – and in what ways. In text-based virtual worlds, Sunden (2003) argued that the online avatars that we type are at the same time distinct from us, the typists, and "incessantly (re)connected to the bodies of their typists" (p. 180). In three dimensional, visual worlds like SL, the avatars are not typed 'into being', but you can actually see them. There is no room for imagining a 'curvaceous' body – you see it. The embodied dimension of 'seeing' in SL made Delia wonder about the pre-cognitive understanding of gender that it triggered. Often times, we would remind ourselves that, after all, the sexuality and gendered bodies we encountered were not that remote from their presence in our real life experiences, like for instance flipping through the pages of a women's or men's magazine. And that, although we interpreted them as oppressive, they might be differently perceived from other situated perspectives. We also observed our tendency to take at face value the visual representations we encountered: we referred to the avatars we saw as 'he' or 'she,' as

the line between the avatars and their typists became blurred in our minds. Rationally, we knew the visual representations of the avatars are nothing like the real-life bodies. But, like Sarah Robbins, we unconsciously imagined them in our minds in association with their avatars: "I found myself asking if the avatar is an accurate reflection of the body; or simply assuming so because I was 'seeing' the avatar" (Delia, March 28, 2008).

Much of the content of our diaries is devoted to the recollection and consideration of what we observed visually. We wrote at length about how places looked in SL, how people looked, in short – what we *saw,* and what we thought about what we saw. The visual interface, even if it didn't remove the need for attention to the things like tone, manner and presentation of interpretation – the things Turkle highlighted in terms of gender performance in text-based worlds – certainly, and especially for newcomers like us, provided powerful cues for our interpretation. While we knew that what we were seeing in terms of the avatars populating the areas we explored might have little or no resemblance (physically) to the typists operating them, it was difficult for both of us to ignore the bombardment of digitally primped and preened bodies. Interestingly, the absolute prevalence of attractive (by fairly specific standards) bodies, either in the form of avatars or advertisements for clothing/skins/body parts and the equally heavy emphasis on physical demonstrations of gender naturalized these norms and at the same time it highlighted their performance and artifice.

Final Discussion

While our autoethnographic project certainly cannot be generalized to all virtual worlds and to all positions on gender, two important problematics come up from our work. First, the question of the relation between gender and virtual worlds appears, in our research, as a complex, multi-faceted one, involving both our situated perspectives, as well as the social visions embedded in the technical and social layers of the world itself. Second, the range of options for the performance of gender is connected to the individual's level of technical skill. This raises crucial questions about the role of technical skill in the presentation of the self, as well as in the dynamics of social status and class.

In talking about the ways in which gender becomes performed and interpreted, Butler (1990) argues that this takes place "through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 191). Obviously, we need to know what the discourses through which these cues (stylization of the body, gestures, movements) are to be interpreted and how. Secondly, the way we relate to these discourses depends on our own positions as well as on the particular context in which we find ourselves.

In this paper, we have approached our understanding of gender in SL along these lines: recognizing our own situated perspectives, and interrogating the relation between them and the options and constraints embedded in the platform. This has allowed us to approach gender as a performance at the intersection between our own positions and the social vision (re)created through the social/technical infrastructure. Furthermore, since SL is a 3D environment, the visual element powerfully renders gender in terms of appearance. Importantly enough, in this case, the appearance remains constrained by particular normative visions of femaleness and maleness. For instance, 'female' and 'male' appearance and beauty were stereotypically constructed: female avatars had slender bodies, tiny waists, big breasts, long hair, revealing clothing; male avatars

had broad shoulders and muscular upper bodies. Body parts, such as eyes, lips, or facial hair, and clothing and accessories further contributed to these stereotypical visual constructions of the binary that we are familiar with in our offline lives.

While we cannot generalize, we believe it is important to raise attention to the need for more critical work on the possible implications of the stereotypical representation of this binary on screen for our own identity constructions. We could hypothesize that this representation of gender can equally be a source of empowerment and of personal gratification. In our case, we have noticed the gradual decrease of our initial heightened gender-awareness as we learned the 'rules of the game': as the social vision within SL became naturalized for us and, thus, less threatening, we no longer noticed (and were no longer bothered by) the 'female/male' binary. While routinization of gender performance is not the same as acceptance of the discursive constructions in which one operates, it remains nevertheless an act of self-disciplining. Yet, what is construed on a personal level as an act of empowerment and taking control of one's life, appears from a macro scale as conformity, compliance, and participation in – and thus perpetuation of - social structures.

In the case of SL, the social/technical platform remains a crucial macro mechanism of suggesting gendered positions, visions, and ultimately identities. The (virtual) material infrastructure in a virtual environment like SL frames the possibilities of action and visual rendering of gendered bodies. The software through which we build this virtual world is not only creating the universe of possible actions, objects, and events but also defines *who* can be an author (according to technical capabilities). Once an author with technical skills, one can manipulate and play with the code, thus escaping the constructions made available by the platform. How gender is 'done' in SL resides not only at the intersection between our own gendered perspectives and the platform, but also in the technical skills we have. In fact, we would argue that the possibility of challenging the gendered vision of the platform depends – to a great extent – on one's knowledge of technical matters, such as software writing. Of course, things like time, interest, and willingness to invest in acquiring these skills are to be considered too. Back in 1993, Neil Postman remarked that our modern societies are becoming *technopolies:* a society in which technology becomes 'deified,' "which means that the culture seeks its authorisation in technology, finds its satisfaction in technology, and takes its orders from technology" (p. 71). Just as the dot.com crash that came on the tail of the new millennium at least muffled many of the utopian cries of the 'digital revolution' Postman foresaw, we found our lived-experiences in SL a challenge to the discourses of freedom and opportunity that have sprung up around virtual environments such as the one we explored. Taking a mutual-shaping approach such as Wajcman advocates, and reflecting seriously upon the situating of our positions, offers the possibility to complexify thinking around virtual worlds. To borrow Barry Wellman's (2004) description of the three phases of Internet research: the initial flurry of predominantly utopian (with some corresponding dystopian scepticism) exclamations of transformative potential; a more subdued documentation period; and the third period, analysis, we suggest the importance of embracing analytical and critical approaches as early as possible in the study of new technologies such as SL. These approaches have the potential to drive wider thought towards important issues of control and domination, a consideration of which is imperative for the development of more truly egalitarian, norm-challenging, spaces.

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