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Topping from the Viewfinder:
The Visual Language of Virtual BDSM Photographs in Second Life

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Abstract

The paper explores the mutually constituted relations between avatars, space, and artifacts depicted in virtual photographs from Second Life's BDSM (bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism) communities. Photographs were sampled from thousands of user profiles of Second Life users who explicitly associate themselves with one or more BDSM communities or groups. Using visual analysis and social semiotics, I describe the visual language of these images, and with them, the grammar and symbolism of power and submission, of individual and institution, and of photographer and viewer. The visual language of these photos sheds light on the nature of these communities, including the social and computer-mediated interactions of their participants, and helps explain why virtual BDSM is such a compelling form of play and source of aesthetic innovation for thousands of Second Life residents.

Keywords: Visual language; sexuality; virtual BDSM; identity; Second Life.

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Introduction

Though the multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) Second Life gained sudden media acclaim in 2006, the game-like space has existed since 2003. Second Life is a participant-created virtual world, which means that every hill, house, skirt, bike, and pair of shoes was created by a Second Life user. Not surprisingly, it is a highly eclectic and often bewildering space. In the relatively quiet years of 2004 and 2005, the world was developing many of the characteristics that have come into their own today, such as virtual fashion lines, a thriving virtual economy, scripted interactive furniture, vehicles, and toys. Perhaps not surprisingly, much of the early content was adult in nature, from cyberstrip clubs to kinky lingerie, sex animations, and interactive virtual genitalia. More surprisingly, to this observer at least, was the visibility and prevalence of the BDSM (bondage, discipline and sadomasochism) subculture. One could go to an ordinary virtual shopping mall and not be surprised to see a master shopping with two kneeling submissives chained beside him. A little inquiry revealed that BDSM factored in many innovations at the time, from some of the most important virtual stores (e.g., Xcite!) to a number of Second Life's most famous early celebrities, whose profiles at the time (if not now) indicated their participation in this subculture.

The virtual BDSM subculture was a force during the early days of Second Life, when users were figuring out how to innovate in the space and make it worthwhile to themselves and the millions who have since followed. Many factors explain this phenomenon. One of them is that sex was often a driver in the early days of a technology, from the VHS to e-commerce, and BDSM is a sexual practice. A second factor is that BDSM, with its strong roles and tight-knit communities, facilitates the creation of a virtual identity and a social place in the world. And another one is that BDSM offers a well-defined aesthetic, which offers those who appreciate it a sense of fulfillment and even self-transcendence (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2007).

BDSM is a sexual and social practice that involves consensual relations of domination and submission (Wiseman, 1996; Weinberg, 1978). In BDSM fantasy play, whether real-life or virtual, slaves and submissives are docile by definition. They have consented to hand over their autonomy to their Doms (male dominants) or Dommes (female dominants), hereafter abbreviated as Dom/mes, which may include surrender of the body for examination, sexual gratification and even dressing, silencing of the voice, limited mobility and other forms of submission (Abernathy, 1996). In return, Dom/mes are expected to provide protection, guidance, and in many cases devotion (Lorelei, 2000).

As the foregoing makes clear, the practice of BDSM is not merely sexual: there is often a psychological and emotional attachment (such as trust) between the Dom and the sub, and above all, the D/s relationship is based on a system of values, that is, a system of rules that enables such a lifestyle to function. For example, emphasis is often placed upon explicit education to counter intrinsic danger, and consent and the use of safe words are additional mechanisms to ensure safety and pleasure during power-exchanging role-playing scenarios that incur risk, pain, and/or extreme behavior.

BDSM also exhibits a recognizable visual aesthetic. Common BDSM icons include ropes, crosses, leather, boots, tattoos, and women in submission. Beyond the mere presence of these icons, the BDSM aesthetic also covers a coherent arrangement of these icons. For example, in Japanese rope fetish photography, we observe that knot patterns, exotically sculpted body positions, minimalist props and color schemes, and unusual camera angles combine to construct a visual aesthetic. Likewise, the use of floggers, the focus on buttocks and thighs, as well as carefully arranged stripes, bruises, and welts on the flesh all mutually constitute the visual language of the spanking fetish. In all, both the practitioners and the artifacts participate and interact in a larger visual-semiotic system in BDSM practice.

One characteristic of that aesthetic, and it is the subject of this paper, is its powerful visual language. BDSM's visual language is not only, thanks to its subject matter, intense but also personal. It enables its practitioners to express their place in the world, attitudes towards their bodies, standards of beauty and sexual desire, fantasies of power, constructions of gender and intimacy, and spirit of play with risk and safety, among others. My hypothesis has been that BDSM fantasy in Second Life is far more than a sexual pastime. I was first attracted to this hypothesis by my observation of the sophisticated behavior and sheer innovation coming out of the communities. Two years of ethnographic observation, interviews, and artifact analysis later[1], I am more than ever convinced that all subcultures have the capacity to incubate innovation in a user-created content, and BDSM is successful particularly because of its combination of a potent visual language and the intense personal desires it stirs.

In the project described in this paper, I analyzed hundreds of virtual photos taken from the public profiles (Figure 1) of Second Life's BDSM practitioners. These profiles combine autobiographical texts, lists of group memberships, virtual photos, and other information to help users get to know each other. Second Life participants commonly use these profiles as ways to choose with whom among a collection of strangers to start a conversation, to get to know a new acquaintance better, as well as to express themselves and their values. The profile pictures become prominent representations of the player to other players.

Figure 1. Self-portrait of a collared submissive.

The analysis of these images reveals much about the BDSM subculture and about one of its most powerful assets: its visual language. Using still images, with the aid of in-game imaging technologies and photographic conventions, practitioners depict stories of masters and submissives as well as their attitudes toward these relationships, and they also draw viewers into

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[1] The completed result of the study is published in Bardzell & Odom, 2008; Bardzell, 2009.

these relationships. Because the majority of community members are submissives whose capacity for self-expression is ritually circumscribed in D/s play, especially in public, these self-portraits become a mechanism for the submissives to express subtle emotion and mood.

The richness of the social practices, sophistication of its institutions, and maturity of its aesthetics all contribute to the success of virtual BDSM. In an eclectic, user-created world such as Second Life, users are often bewildered at its sheer incoherence. In contrast to proper games, such as World of Warcraft, Second Life generally lacks a graduated introduction to its world that acclimates new users to the space. BDSM communities offer, in addition to sexual gratification, a regular place to go, a community, a sense of purpose, and a complex and, for many, fulfilling subculture. Understanding the appeal of virtual BDSM may help us gain more general insights of relationships among desire, virtual communities, aesthetics, and design. The combination of visual analysis and social semiotics used in this project offers us ways to understand and describe the value of these communities for their users.

Methodology

Rather than relying solely on "a good eye," visual analysis is used as a systematic way to collect and categorize groups of images, in this case, a collection of virtual BDSM members' self-portraits, in a consistent manner. This approach also provides the foundation for critical visual analysis through a social semiotic interpretation method after data collection. No members of a BDSM group were recruited for this study, though the study was informed by other research involving contact with members of these communities.

Image Selection Procedure

A collection of images was selected for the study by accessing the Second Life's group search menu. A search on 8 keywords — "sub," "Dom," "sado ," "bondage, "bdsm," "sade," "gor," and "slave" — yielded 286 BDSM-related member-operated groups in September 2006, with a total of 6,166 members. Each of these groups has a publicly viewable charter and a list of its members. Clicking names in this charter brings up members' individual profiles, which includes member photos, avatar rating (given by fellow avatars in-world), group affiliations, and autobiographies (Figure 2). Both avatar self-portraits and the snapshots from the "Picks" tab, which often depict avatars in social relations such as master/slave, professor/student, fellow submissives and so on (Figure 3), are included in the study.
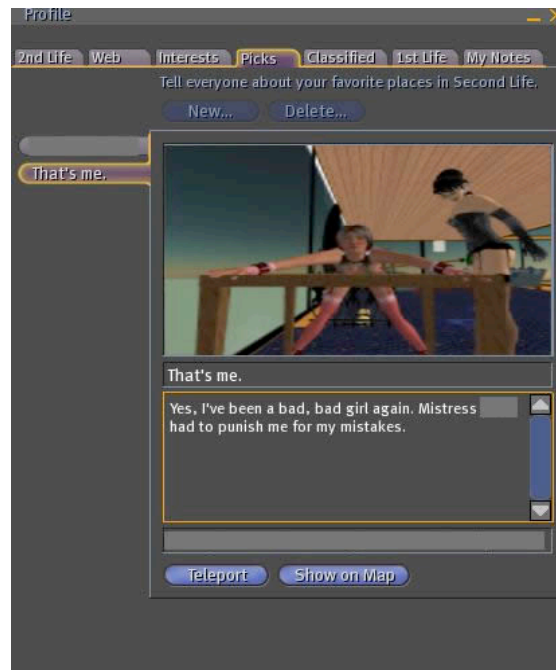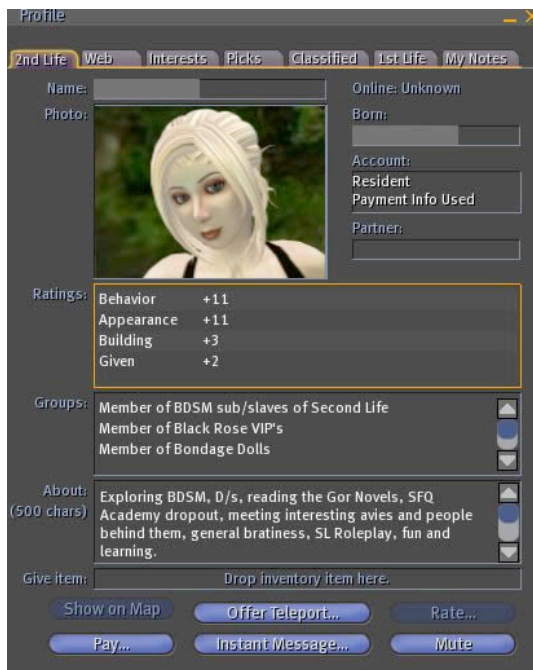
Figure 2. A typical Second Life member profile.   **Figure 3.** A snapshot from "Picks."

Randomization was used to select 57 groups from the 286 groups identified for the study. Due to the large data set, and to ensure that the images I analyzed were representative, I performed another randomization procedure using a sample-size calculator to arrive at the sample size of 372 images for the study, with 95% confidence level and a confidence interval of 5%. For the final analysis, 375 pictures were studied.

All 375 images follow the same naming conventions in the spreadsheet used to record the data and subsequent analysis: images are named by their group ID number, followed by an underscore and then the image number.

Coding Categories

Having selected a sample of BDSM group members' self-portraits, a set of categories for coding these images was devised with the objective of facilitating ensuing analysis and interpretation. The categories were developed based on the central research predispositions: (1) that visuality depicts and conveys social relations and emotions, and (2) that quantitative (such as content analysis) and qualitative (such as semiotics and psychoanalysis) visual methodologies are not mutually exclusive (Krippendorf, 1980; Rose, 2001). The resulting coding categories and issues were selected specifically to support critical interpretation in order to situate each image in the broader socio-cultural context.

The coding categories, both descriptive and interpretive, are devised to avoid overlaps and strive to be as comprehensive and exhaustive as possible in order to capture the richness of the images studied. In all, 29 image characteristics are identified, divided into 4 different coding categories, as specified in Table 1.

Coding Categories	Issues Examined
Presentations of film techniques	• Location of the shot • Surroundings of avatars photographed • Setting • Light (outdoors & indoors) • Overall color of the photographs • Vantage (point from which the camera perceives the main figure) • Shot composition (framing)
Representations of the body	• Race • Gender • Hair color • Hair style • Body types • Masculinity • Femininity • Number of avatars in the photograph
Representations of activities	• Activity level of the foreground avatar • Activity type of the foreground avatar • Agency and activity • Intimacy styles • Interaction (avatar-avatar) • Interaction (avatar-artifact) • Eye contact • Pose • Positional communication (spatial arrangement of the avatars)
Representations of socio-cultural elements	• Ritual focus • Fashion (fabrics) • Fashion (styles) • Presence of props • D/s status

Table 1. Coding categories for BDSM members' portraits

Each of the randomly selected BDSM group members' self-portraits was examined against these four coding categories with the relevant codes assigned to it. A spreadsheet with multiple worksheets for each category was set up to record the information.

Analysis

The results of the coding process provided the foundation for a semiotic analysis, intended to facilitate a description of the photos' visual language. A social semiotics approach to visual analysis involves "the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with

images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted" (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). Using language as a metaphor to describe images, the social semiotics approach provides a detailed way to understand the correlations among avatars, space, and artifacts depicted in these BDSM self-portraits, through the examination of a collection of socially and culturally meaningful symbolic signs — the shared grammar of these photographs, so to speak. These images illustrate the social life and history of the avatars in the context of Second Life BDSM subculture. The context is significant as it impacts how the portrait is staged and photographed, how the message and expectations of the BDSM participants are constructed (i.e., how virtual BDSM participants attach ideas and meanings to the intimate experiences they have in-world), as well as how the viewer perceives the portraits.

To explore the mutual relationships between the images and spectatorships, between form and meaning, I examined these 375 self-portraits by reviewing their narrative structure (the representations of film techniques and body) and interaction structure (the representations of activities and cultural elements).

Narrative Structure

As in literary works, narrative structures in images include settings and actors. In this section, I explore these two notions as presented in BDSM resident self-portraits.

Pictorial Settings: From Space to Place

The locations and surroundings depicted in these self-portraits provide the situated context for the particular pictorial story to develop. Stories are made meaningful in large part due to the inter-connection between space and place. Space deals with physical coordinates and topological relations between the architectural forms; it is external to human understanding. Place, on the other hand, is a socio-cultural construct where notions of the self and identity are formed (Harrison & Dourish, 1996; Wright et al., 2005). The self-portraits reflect how these residents come to understand and appreciate such architectural forms not merely as products of perception but as something meaningful and emotional to the individual as well as the community. In the 375 pictures studied, 204 pictures were taken outdoors (54% of all images), many in full daylight, and in both urban and rural settings. Only 33 of all the pictures studied are set in fetish-themed indoor dungeons (9% of all images). The openness of these settings underscores members' sense of the acceptance of the lifestyle, that it is not the social taboo needing to be hidden from sight that it is in real-life America.

This openness is further expressed by the deployment of the extreme long shot in some of these pictures where the emphasis is placed upon the environment and the background the avatar is set against (as seen in Figure 4). The intimate details of the avatar are rendered less discernible, signifying the relative value of the individual in the whole scheme of the setting, rather than the particulars of the avatar, him- or herself. The combination of the wide shot and body position contributes to the understanding of the relative value of the submissive's place in the world, a self-effacing move for a profile portrait. The fact that the subject is relegated to such a small role reinforces the power dynamics between Dom/me and sub. The setting, and its relation to the avatar, is only one signifier of the submissive's place in the world.

Figure 4. Wide-angle shot reveals submissive in his environment.

Actors in Pictorial Stories

Actors are obviously central aspects of any visual narrative. The depiction of avatars in the self-portraits conveys personality and preference of the avatars and also projects psychological states and ideology.

Basic avatar demographics information emerges as a result of coding the sample collection of 375 pictures. Note that these demographics apply to Second Life avatars, not to their human real-life players. In all, about half (49%) of the avatars state whether they are Dom/mes or subs. Of those that self-identified, 46% of the Doms are male and 54% of the Dommes are female. The majority of the subs are female (94%). The gender split is evident in D/s relationships: 34% of the male avatars self-identify as Doms and 6% of the male avatars identify as subs; 13% of the female avatars identify as Dommes and 44% of the female avatars identify as subs (the remainder could not be identified as either Dom/me or sub). The findings are consistent with the general stereotypes of gender dynamics in BDSM practices, that men are natural Doms and women are natural submissives.

The depiction of the characters/avatars often has more explicit BDSM themes; it also demonstrates a higher correlation between both the BDSM social conventions and photographic conventions as well as the individual's understanding and adherence of such conventions. In all, the self-portraits are fairly simple with little ornamentation (55% of them contain only 1 avatar and 60% of them have no props present). The simplicity of the portraits encourages viewers to concentrate on the avatar herself/himself. However, within such simplicity, dynamics are revealed as the avatars either conform or deviate from the established conventions in order to express their identities. For example, as I will elucidate below, while most avatars share similar physiques and photographic framing, some stand out, for example, by the unique fashion she/he wears, or by unique framing of the self-portraits.

The Ideal of Beauty

A unique set of avatar attributes emerges from the coding of BDSM resident self-portraits, presenting a picture of residents' collective consciousness about the self and what constitutes "beauty" and "normality" in the community. The body types depicted in the *Second*

Life BDSM group members' self-portraits are overwhelmingly slender and desirable. Added to that are notions of desirability embedded in race and fashion: 87% of the avatars are white, 2% are of color, 9% are non-human, 66% of the avatars are female and 59% of the photographs depict avatars with long, luxuriously flowing hair. Black is the preferred hair color (35%), followed by blonde (21%). Tall, thin, pale skin, dark-haired avatars suggest a Goth influence on the BDSM subculture, not surprising given its "dark" nature. This influence is generally common to all of Second Life, as Goth is a major visual influence throughout the world.

Hair is one of the most powerful symbols to describe individual and group identities as it reflects both personal and public preference (Synnott, 1993). In Second Life BDSM community, while the choice of hairstyle is private and voluntary, the individual is also subject to enormous pressure exerted by the community to adhere to the community's expectation of what is considered "beautiful" and "acceptable." The submissives, especially, are expected to have long hair (Figures 5 and 6), a gendered sign and representation of sexuality in the community (and our society for that matter) as the Doms (mostly men) prefer that their subs have long hair because it is sexier and more feminine[2]. The virtual BDSM community in *Second Life* goes a step further as the Dom uses the punishment of short hair as a way to discipline those submissives who are insubordinate, a branding of the submissives in the community in which obedience and surrender of both the body and mind are prized. The long hair is thus not only a cultural product of femininity, it is also strongly associated with community-sanctioned norms and beliefs. Short hair becomes a sign of submissive rebellion, and in addition to the disciplinary humiliation that it brings, it is also a warning of the potentially devastating consequences for those who operate outside of the prescribed conventions. For example, the penalties for insubordinate submissives in some areas include whipping, capture, and even execution, which may be presented in the context of fun and play (as whipping often is) or more serious consequences of being banned from the server (symbolized by execution).

Figure 5. The code of beauty: long and black hair.

Figure 6. Flowing hair as symbol of femininity.

Identity Play through Fashion

While bodies belong to individuals, they are nonetheless defined and made meaningful by society; this is even more true in a space such as Second Life, where the construction of avatars is typically achieved by purchasing body parts made by other members (e.g., shapes, which include the body dimensions; skins, which include the skin tone, facial features, and makeup; and clothing, including hair, shirts, lingerie, jewelry, and boots). These bodily

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[2] This insight was obtained from interviews for a separate project.

characteristics are non-verbal signifiers that provide communication cues, adhering to the established BDSM notions of the ideal female form, whether Dominant or submissive. For example, many submissives wear translucent skirts that reveal their pubic hair, a signifier of their accessibility (i.e., they are not wearing underwear, which in turn signifies their availability for sex). One's ability to monitor and control bodily performance mediates and facilitates social interactions (Goffman, 1969), so the fact that these avatars collectively construct a unified social identity with shared characteristics suggests the power of the BDSM community's social influence over individual's management of his/her body.

This brings to the fore the importance which identity plays in Second Life BDSM fantasy play. As Turkle suggests, "When I step through the screen into virtual communities, I construct our identities on the other side of the looking glass" (Turkle, 1995). Indeed, the nature of the 3D-immersive medium affords and encourages identity exploration. The flesh-and-blood player behind the avatar is not bound to play a character that shares affinity with the real-life self but is free to experiment and explore. Thus, such exploration affects the formation of both the identity and avatar-avatar relationship (Taylor, 2006). This is evident from the visual analysis of self-portraits as the photographs serve as a documentary of such exploration.

The phenomenon is especially evident when I approach virtual BDSM identity play in Second Life from the perspective of virtual fashion. Due to the nature of participant-created environments, in which ready-made objects (e.g., shirt, skirt, shoes, and hair, etc.) are provided and editable by residents, avatars have a significant amount of freedom to perform identity play (Bardzell, 2006). This identity play reflects users' psychological state (Turkle, 1995), the values of their community (White, 2006) and the practice of gender and racial stereotypes (Nakamura, 2002), in which a dominant white and slender avatar personae emerged as a collective identity of these virtual BDSM participants.

The characteristics of virtual fashion seen in these self-portraits reflect the practice of identity play. In all, cloth is the main material for avatars' outfits (56% of all images), with leather and latex combined as the secondary material (13% total of all images). The use of leather and latex as fabrics for the avatar outfits is consistent with erotic fetish photographic books (e.g., Higgs, 2000; Delves-Broughton, 2003), in which the leather and latex are presented as part of the larger and distinct BDSM code of fetish art. Used in anything from shirts, skirts, bodysuits, and lingerie to harness, gloves, wristbands, boots, and even French maid outfits in Second Life, these materials, coupled with distinctive colors such as black and red, are essential components of virtual BDSM fashion that is sensual, suggestive (of sexual interaction) and mood-evoking.

The identity play and implied sexual actions seen in the self-portraits are further reinforced through the embodied forms of dress codes. The outfits (Figures 7 and 8) chosen by those avatars who engage, role-play and experiment with virtual BDSM in Second Life are often low-cut, revealing and barely cover their bodies. Submissives can appear topless, wear fishnet stockings, and with sultry and erotic poses. They can also be seen dressed as kitty cats, with pointy cat ears and tails, or elaborately outfitted as ponies ready to be entered into pony races by their Doms (the racing pony girl fetish is a common fantasy scene in BDSM, as seen, for example, in Anne Rice's [1990] BDSM-themed *Sleeping Beauty* erotic novels). These specialized outfits are mapped to culturally-produced visual signs specific to the BDSM lifestyle and to signal the identity of the participants. In the process, it also dictates how spectators should appreciate and understand such identity: by displaying their bodies in such a unique fashion, these avatars naturally identify themselves as erotic objects of the gaze of the Dom/mes as well as spectators.

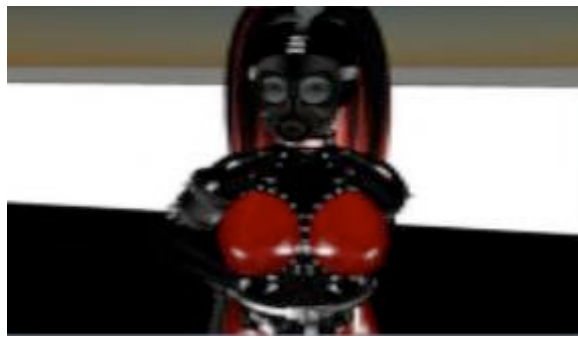**Figure 7.** A scantily clad submissive in the arms of her Dom.

Figure 8. Latex is a common topos in virtual BDSM fashion.

As much as identity is essential to the lived experience of the avatars, it is also determined by social structures. Wenger's understanding of communities of practice is that people negotiate meanings and create their identities in communal settings (Wenger, 1998). In the context of virtual BDSM, the interactions between individual identity and community are most visible in selecting a role (Dom/me, sub, switch, outlaw), a community (D/s, Gorean, etc.), and whether one is a virtual-only or real-life BDSM practitioner. These decisions have a profound impact on how participants perceive and present themselves, and they are often manifested via fashion. In one community (Gor, to be discussed below), for example, the clothing options for free women and slave women are dramatically different, and failure to adhere to the fashion mores (e.g., the free woman's wearing of a veil) may result in a change in roles (such as capture and enslavement, which leads to collaring and new fashion practices). In these ways, the virtual BDSM community itself becomes an important mechanism to establish common ties and a shared identity, an interaction described by Driskell & Lyon (2002, cited in Nardi & Harris, 2006).

Interaction Structure

In addition to narrative characteristics that reveal avatar's position in place and space, BDSM self-portraits also contain elements of social interactions that tease out the dominant cultural values associated with the objects and actors depicted. In conceptualizing visual interactions, Kress and Leeuwen identify two types of participants as the actors in any visual interactions: representative participants (the people, the places, and artifacts depicted in images) and interactive participants (the people who communicate via images — the producers and consumers of images). Representative participants and the interactive participants take part in the following three different interactions (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996):

- Interactions between represented participants
- Interactions between represented and interactive participants, the attitudes of interaction participants towards represented participants
- Interactions between interactive participants

These interactions are encoded in the self-portraits studied, through representations of activities as well as artifacts with socio-cultural significance to the avatar and the community she/he belongs to. In this section, I will focus on the first two types of interactions. These are more visible when seen through the lenses of intimacy and artifacts as described below.

Intimacy

Since we are social beings, biologically programmed to interact with others, our body language conveys our emotional state during all of our interactions (Norman, 2004). Along similar lines, the avatars depicted in the BDSM group members' self-portraits transmit their affective conditions through eye contact, expressions, poses, and other subtle or expressive physical performances. Second Life facilitates these forms of expression not only with a fairly rich collection of built-in character animations, but also by enabling designers to design and import custom character animations, which are available by the thousand in Second Life (usually for a nominal fee); animations and poses of intimate relations are particularly well represented.

When female avatars are depicted in an activity besides looking at the camera, they are seen in close physical contact with their male counterparts (76% of all pictures studied) through embraces and kisses, sitting or lying down together (Figures 9 to 12). As these pictures demonstrate, female avatars are often seen engaged in male-initiated physical activities: female avatars are often held in the male avatars' arms, caressed by the male. These images tell a story of dominant male in control. Not surprisingly, female avatars are visually represented as sexually passive in the self-portraits of virtual BDSM practitioners, conforming to the D/s relationship patterns where the (typically female) submissives, dominated by their masters, await male initiation to begin sexual interaction.

Figure 9. Physical interaction between male and female.

Figure 10. The male envelops the female in a kiss.

Figure 11. Female held in male's arms.

Figure 12. A clingy and vulnerable

Embodied Interaction Through Artifacts

Artifacts also contribute to the construction and representation of interactions in these images. In virtual environments such as Second Life, avatars are engaged in lived experiences through interacting with physical objects, such as furniture, toys, houses, clothes, etc. These artifacts support embodied computing, in Dourish's (2001) sense, because they ensure that in-world social interactions are grounded in concrete, familiar and perceptual reality (as opposed to an abstract symbolic system). The artifacts also mediate avatar activities, in Nardi's (2006) sense, because they "translate mental processes into instrumental acts." In other words, the expression and performance of sexual interaction is externalized, visualized, and made meaningful through the use of artifacts. For example, tying a submissive to whipping post externalizes and visualizes the Dom/me's assertion of authority over the sub.

Common BDSM props include toys (e.g., feathers, blindfolds, whips, floggers, crops, etc.) and furniture (e.g., cages, pillows, cushions, Saint Andrew's crosses, automated avatar-mounted fucking machines, etc.). Both toys and furniture (Figures 13, 14, and 15) alike are not only familiar artifacts that provide the necessary physical, embodied presence for the avatars in-world, they are also vital in the construction of scenes that enable virtual BDSM fantasy play. While the scenes in real life BDSM are occasions where sexual interactions take place, in virtual BDSM, as observed through participants' self-portraits, they become the mechanism in which the spectator can use to visualize experiences (Tong & Tan, 2002). Slave collars and leashes (Figure 16) are especially ubiquitous artifacts featured in many self-portraits. Collars and leashes instantly convey relations of power and suggest interactions and narratives.

Though thousands of sexual animations exist in Second Life, the fact is that most sexual interactions are only basically animated while most of the interaction takes place in text chat. Second Life sexual interactions are not fully animated from beginning to end, the way a Pixar movie is. They often involve largely static poses with a single short looped animation, such as a couple in the missionary position on the bed, thrusting over and over again in exactly the same manner. A change in this action typically requires standing up, moving to a new piece of furniture and initiating its animations, which would likewise be largely static with a simple looping structure. Thus, the role of furniture and toys is primarily suggestive, punctuating and visualizing a broader interactive experience that is not fully visualized. The indexical nature of visual representations of furniture and toys extends to profile portraits, which use these items as indices to further an image's capacity to tell a story.

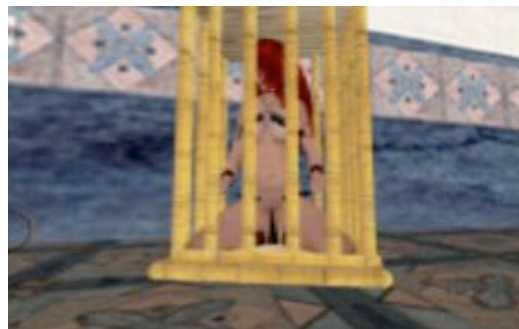**Figure 13.** Female submissives as household furniture.

Figure 14. A caged slave in a submissive pose.

Figure 15. A Dom in front of Saint

Figure 16. Slave collars and leashes at work.

Photographer-Spectator Relationships

In my analysis of the narrative and interactive structures of these images, I focused primarily on interactions among representative participants, specifically on the mutually constituting relationships among residents, place, and artifacts. Now I turn the focus to the interactions between interactive participants, to show ways that the significance of these interactions is mediated by the photographic techniques used to related stories by the avatar-photographer. The interactions between the photographer and the spectator, while non-verbal and asynchronous, are nonetheless direct and still present and discernable, primarily through the way the photographer acknowledges and engages the attention of the spectator. A special gesture or a tantalizing pose, for example, affects attention and interpretation. Such image "acts" thus constitute and make visible the interactions between interactive participants. This is especially evident in the way the producer of these self-portraits manipulates photographic techniques to demand the spectator's engagement in the imagery of virtual BDSM.

Due to the fact that these resident self-portraits, like most images, separate their creators (photographers) from their viewers, photographers and spectators alike need to reconstitute this relationship asynchronously. In what follows, I will use critical analysis to infer these relationships.

The Significance of Light Sources

The deployment of light (both outdoors & indoors) not only bears significance to the resident's overall sense-making of both space and place, it also serves as a communication conduit between the photographer and the spectator. For indoor pictures, both electric and candlelight are used as light sources, which contextualizes the nature of virtual BDSM the avatar engaged in as depicted in the self-portraits. One major BDSM community in Second Life is a simulation of the 1970s cult BDSM-fantasy novels about Gor, by John Norman. A common topos in fantasy and science fiction novels is the magical medieval setting, and Gor adopts it. Not surprisingly, members of virtual Gorean communities in Second Life use candlelight to highlight the narrative elements of these self-portraits, conveying a thematically appropriate message. The dominant source of light in the majority of the outdoor pictures is sunlight (65%); as noted earlier, the prevalence of sunlight and the outdoors in these images suggests an openness about

the lifestyle that contrasts with real-life, at least in the United States.

Focalization

The notion of intimacy and distance not only exists between representative participants as noted earlier, but they are also prominent between interactive participants. Indeed, the affective interactions between the interactive participants (i.e., photographer and the spectator) are conveyed through the technique of focalization as the avatar-photographer constructs and expresses the unique message through the deliberate manipulation of focalization.

Focalization (which includes framing and shot composition), carefully chosen by the avatar-photographer to present the pictorial story she/he is narrating, is the artist's vision in which events unfold. This is akin to the "point of view" or "narrative perspective" in literary works (Bal, 1997), as the reader/spectator views the story from the perspective of character/photographer and accepts what's being presented. As such, focalization not only relates to perception, it also influences interpretation directly. Indeed, focalization not only orients the spectator during the act of appreciation, it also dictates the relationship between the agent that sees (the spectator) and what is seen (the avatar, in the case of self-portrait). While the spectator may exert voyeuristic domination over the representative participants (the viewed subjects), at the same time, the spectator is also subject to the focalization of the photographer through the exertion of power over the one who gazes. The examination of both the subject and the object of focalization reveals interesting dynamics in the photographer-spectator interactions.

Masculinity and femininity, as presented in the self-portraits through focalization, contribute to such interactions. As much as 62% of avatars' self-portraits utilize the technique of medium shot to emphasize the feminine and masculine physiques from the waist up (Figure 17). Close-up shots are also used: 13% of the self-portraits use such camera composition to emphasize the breasts, while only 0.5% of them single out facial expressions (Figures 18 and 19). These result in a more detailed visual information in the portraits. Since viewers are brought closer to the avatars through these two-camera composition techniques, they become more emotionally involved in the submissives' and/or Dom/me's affective states. In addition, recalling Mulvey's notion of *festishistic scopophilia* (Mulvey, 1989), where the female body is presented simply as a desired object separated from the person herself, such focalization and its concomitant depersonalization reinforces the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator.

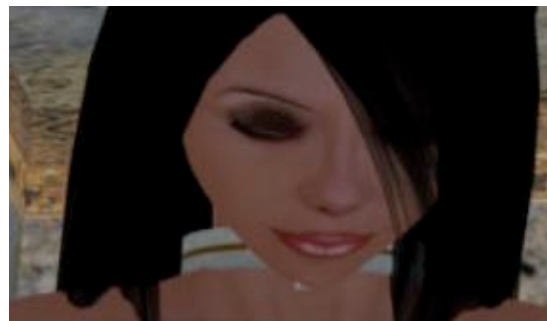**Figure 17.** Focalizing on the breasts invites the male gaze.

Figure 18. A close-up shot of a submissive.

Figure 19. A close-up shot makes the avatars' affective state visible and the photographer-spectator interaction more intimate.

As noted earlier, while an image can encourage the audience to relate intimately and emotionally to the represented avatars, the placement of the props in combination with the photographic framing can also create a sense of distance and detachment. As discussed earlier, the use of wide shots (Figure 20), where the full-body length of the avatar is seen against a rich backdrop, makes it difficult for the spectator to feel physically and emotionally connected to the avatar. Out of all the portraits studied, 89 (24% of all images) keep the spectators at bay this way. As such, the focalized objects (i.e., the environments and the events as opposed to the avatar) dominate the image where the role of the individual is downplayed to highlight the significance of the event, space, and/or community.

Figure 20. A long shot that narrates D/s relationship.

Vantage and Spectatorship

Vantage, the point from which camera perceives the main figure in a photograph, often mediates photographer-spectator interaction. While the majority (69% of the pictures) of the self-portraits are taken with the front-and-center camera position where the viewers can easily identify and make aware the avatar's overall behavior and the environment he/she is in, 13% of the pictures examined stand out with distinct framing.

In Figure 21, for instance, the submissive deviates from the photographic convention commonly seen in the sampled images by choosing to shoot the photograph from the vantage point of one that is over her Master's shoulders: the Dom stands tall and strong, with the

submissive kneeling by his feet, looking up with reverence. The gaze of the two avatars connotes devotion. The spectator is forced to look at the submissive from the point of the view of the master as well — the distance between the master and the submissive becomes the distance between the submissive avatar and her spectator — the viewer, too, is admired by the submissive. The master and the submissive look directly at each other and nothing else — the gaze of the two avatars connotes devotion in the relation. The juxtapositions of the standing master and the kneeling submissive and the careful mise-en-scène together construct a compelling story of virtual BDSM fantasy play in which the spectator participates — as a Master. This is "topping from the bottom," because the "submissive" is forcing all viewers to relate to her a certain way. The fact that the submissive is able to impose mastery of herself onto all who view her profile is an example of the power dynamics called into play in virtual BDSM practice.

Figure 21. The viewer gazes at the submissive as a master.

Photographic techniques thus contribute specifically to D/s messages: the self-portraits convey a subtle visual language that empowers submissives to speak. While the spectator may gaze (voyeuristic domination of the viewed subject); at the same time, the viewer is also subject to the framing of the photographer (the viewed subject exerts agency over the gazer).

Conclusion

The visual language of BDSM is available in a number of places, from fetish photo books to Second Life BDSM goods merchant advertisements. I selected profile pictures because they are widely available and yet also highly personal. BDSM is a personal, intimate lifestyle, on- or offline. The visual language of profile pictures reflects the norms and aesthetics of the subculture, but it is also used for intimate self-expression, self-narration, and identity formation. These are powerful and important activities for participants in virtual worlds, who are typically faced with the daunting task of figuring out who they are online. This language not only enables this self-discovery, but it also facilitates expression of that discovery and situates one within a community that understands and respects it.

The role of the profile image as a photograph adds an interesting and even paradoxical dynamic to BDSM imagery. In the case of submissives, though the avatar may be submissive in-world and may accept certain ritual constraints to speech and behavior, she or he has no such relationship with the viewer, and thus has the power of the photographer to use the visual language of BDSM to assert her identity in her own way. This assertion manifests a powerful form of self-expression that goes against her or his putative submission in-world. In the case of Dom/mes, while they can also assert themselves through framing images by including themselves in a sexualized context (their own profiles), they also offer up their bodies to the

objectifying gaze of the spectator. Spectators, who may themselves be Dom/mes, subs or curious by-standers, enter into this power dynamic. For those who are new to virtual BDSM, it may well be that their experience of this kind of imagery creates a compelling, shocking, deeply sexual, repulsive, shameful, or otherwise intense reaction that serves as a quick introduction to BDSM.

This happens all at the same time: the desirable and undesirable cultural norms of BDSM are transmitted by indoctrinating new participants and reinforcing themselves with existing ones. Some of these norms include the following: that human relationships involve sexual exchanges of power, that intimate interaction takes place in rich and varied narratives, that women are submissive, that places and communities can provide meaning and support for deeply personal sexual self-explorations, that sexy people are thin and white, that long hair signifies femininity and submissiveness, that the deep secrets of the self can be articulated through hairstyles, latex and erotic pillow-poses, that fear and violence can be controlled and used for pleasure, that exotic sexual fantasies are common and acceptable, and that a complex visual language can be used to augment verbal language and body language in sexual acts and autobiographical expressions about them.

The visual language of virtual BDSM is a powerful mode of communication, and its language helps people explore and express their most intimate desires, fears, and fantasies. This, and not temporary sexual gratification or shock value, possibly explains the prevalence and persistence of BDSM in virtual environments such as Second Life. Virtual BDSM visuality is a mode of discourse which empowers even submissives to speak sincerely and profoundly.

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