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The Griefer and the Stalker: Disruptive Actors in a Second Life Educational Community

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Abstract

Linden Lab's *Second Life* (SL) is well-known for its hands-off approach to user conflict-resolution. Although users are given tools to mute and block individual accounts as well as ban undesirable avatars from user-owned land, that does not prevent determined, malicious users from disrupting communities and harassing individuals. This case study focuses on two such malicious users exemplary of two specific types of malevolent virtual world actors: in-world griefers and online stalkers. As part of a decade-long ethnographic research project within the Cypris Chat English language learning community in SL, this paper utilizes data gleaned from notes on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and first-hand encounters. It categorizes the disparate strategies these individuals have used over the years in their attempts to disrupt group cohesion, sow distrust between students and teachers, humiliate individuals, and foment an atmosphere of fear and anxiety. It then reviews the methods community members used to defend themselves from such attacks and analyzes the efficacy of these strategies. This study builds on our understanding of harassment in virtual worlds and acts as a cautionary tale for future virtual world educators and community leaders considering the development of their own online classes and groups.

1. Linden Lab: Offline Privacy and Online Freedom

Since its creation in 2003, Linden Lab's *Second Life* (SL) (Linden Lab, 2003) virtual world platform has valued its users' anonymity and provided *residents* (as the company calls SL users) with a sandbox in which to build and sell user-created content and socialize in whichever way they see fit (Au, 2008). As offline anonymity was prioritized, though, Linden Lab did not initially develop foolproof mechanisms for *in-world* (platform-specific) privacy and freedom from social interaction. Although Linden Lab's design philosophy did evolve to meet resident preferences during the last decade, SL creator Philip Rosedale originally intended to make social friction an engine for creativity.

All of (Second Life) is done in one contiguous space . . . the web has the metaphor of hyperlinking. It has this idea that you can always jump from one page to the next and in that sense all the pages are connected. Some of the attempts that people have made historically . . . to create 'the metaverse' – to create 3D spaces online – have failed to recognize that what's so critically important is that all of this stuff happen in one big space. If you're going to have emergent properties . . . if you're going have people at every scale create something amazing, you have to make it all connected to itself (Rosedale, 2006).

The emergent properties that drive creativity and competition in a virtual world do not thrive in isolation. However, this is not always what all residents have wanted. The increasing popularity of private islands disconnected from the SL mainland was indicative of resident demand for safer, more controlled environments. This reflected the norms of other online sandbox game environments like Minecraft (Mojang, 2009), which allows users to host their own servers and ban avatars, accounts, and even IP addresses. Residents who can afford \$229 USD a month can rent a private region (Second Life, 2019), often referred to as a *sim*, and these residents do have a modicum of control within these areas; however, most individuals have to make do with renting small parcels of land for their SL residences or businesses. When any part of a sim is public, this essentially leaves one's land (i.e. server space) less than entirely private, as residents are capable of seeing and interacting with individuals on the sim via the SL mini-map and *IMs* (instant messages).

Second Life residents do have a basic toolset they can use to protect themselves on an individual basis. This can be accessed through most software used to navigate SL, including Linden Lab's default browser. Residents can *mute* other residents or *block* them. Muting prevents a resident's text messages – both in public and private chat – from being seen; blocking another resident turns the offending avatar into a featureless gray blob from the blocker's perspective as well. The former prevents text and voice-based harassment, while the latter also masks potentially offensive avatar behavior (such as nudity).

Muting and blocking are useful self-defense mechanisms in SL for all residents, but they have their limitations. First, they are not designed with crowds, classes, or group management in mind. Whether one is a teacher leading a class or an MC at an SL dance event, one must be aware of what is happening in local chat. If a resident exhibits offensive or disruptive behavior during an activity, the individual responsible for that event may feel an obligation to refrain from blocking or muting the abuse or annoyance in order to protect those present. This is especially true when they have not been given full privileges to ban or block, a powerful privilege not lightly doled out by group leaders and landowners. Second, muting and blocking are mechanisms that residents new to SL, or ones with limited English language ability, may initially be unaware of. This makes new residents and non-native English users particularly vulnerable to harassment and might explain why the social hubs frequented by new residents are often a target for in-world troublemakers.

As previously mentioned, Linden Lab has also given a separate toolset to landowners within SL (Linden, n.d.). Owners are able to restrict access to their parcel by linking it to group membership. They also can ban individual avatars from entering their parcel. Landowners can also temporarily kick avatars who will be transported to the edge of the owners' property. They may also give these permissions to select group members. They cannot, however, block individual IP addresses. Nor can they kick avatars out of the sim (i.e., off the server) unless they own the entire region. This is problematic as determined residents can still cause trouble for groups as long as they remain somewhere on the server.

Linden Lab has not chosen to request personal information when making new accounts that might compromise anonymity in the name of greater security, unlike other virtual world platforms (Schultz, 2018). Account suspensions and deletions are rare and are reserved for certain cases of content theft and resale, gambling, and sexual exploitation of minors (whether real or simulated by adult actors) outlined in the Second Life Terms and Conditions (Linden Lab, 2017). SL residents have the ultimate say in how much they reveal about their offline existence. This freedom to choose how to 'play' SL provides residents with opportunities to interact, experiment, and explore not found on other platforms.

2. Harassment in Virtual Worlds

In multiplayer games and virtual environments, increased freedom of interaction often means increased tolerance of harassment. Online harassment can take many forms, and one way to conceptualize it is along a continuum of in-world to off-line. On one end of the spectrum is harassment limited to one online platform. Much of trolling and griefing falls into this category. Although it is hard to find a definition of trolling that can be universally agreed upon, Morrissey (2010) defines it succinctly as "an utterer producing an intentionally false or incorrect utterance with high order intention to elicit from recipient a particular response, generally negative or violent" (p. 77). Trolls do not necessarily argue and insult from a genuine distaste of their victims' perspectives and actions; they may take any position or use any insult they feel will be most provocative and may create separate identities to do so (Donath, 1999). Although griefing is sometimes considered a category of trolling (Thacker & Griffiths, 2012), it can be more clearly differentiated as a form of harassment "which utilizes aspects of the game structure or physics in unintended ways to cause distress for other players" (Warner & Raitner, 2005, p. 47). While the troll uses text or audio messages to harass, the griefer uses emergent features within the platform itself to annoy or degrade the enjoyment their victim receives from the environment, often to the point where the situation becomes unbearably uncomfortable, or the victims' computers simply crash. In SL, griefer attacks have been known to disable large groups of contiguous sims until they have been reported and stopped by Linden Lab administrators.

On the other end of the spectrum is stalking, or more specifically, cyberstalking. There are several characteristics that differentiate cyberstalking in virtual worlds from trolling and griefing, though there may be notable overlap. The first characteristic is the longitudinal and focused nature of the harassment. While trolls or griefers may frequent a certain server or area, cyberstalkers take a long-term interest in harassment of an individual. The second difference is the goal of the harassment; while trolls and griefers aim to frustrate and anger their victims, stalkers provide insistent, unwelcome attention designed to cause anxiety and fear (Baum, Catalano, Rand, & Rose, 2009, p. 1). Stalkers may not realize that their behavior conflicts with social norms and they may be motivated by unrequited attraction or a desire for revenge for some perceived slight. The third difference is the cyberstalker's willingness to pursue their victims across multiple online platforms, as well as offline. Independent game designer Zoe Quinn (2017) writes of her experiences with a horde of cyberstalkers after a disgruntled boyfriend posted an online "manifesto" about their break up:

The places where I sold my games, talked with friends, or even just looked at cute cat videos were suddenly awash in pictures of mutilated bodies, images of horrible violence, and threats to do these things and worse to me. My home address and phone number were discovered and distributed, leading to 5 a.m. phone calls from strangers detailing the ways they planned to rape me and people bragging about leaving dead animals in my mailbox. Nude photos of me were dug up, printed out, jizzed on by strangers, and mailed to colleagues, friends and family. (p. 2-3).

The cyberstalker's goal is to foment fear and unease in their targets, and should their victim be accessible via social media or vulnerable in their life offline, those avenues for harassment may also be taken. This leads us to our final distinction between trolling/griefing and cyberstalking: while the former is seen as an annoyance, the latter borders on – and sometimes crosses the line into – criminal conduct.

3. Rationale

During data collection for my doctoral dissertation on a language learning community within Second Life (DuQuette, 2017), I was exposed to two exemplars of harassment within the group, one that falls on the trolling/griefing end of the continuum and one an example of cyberstalking. Although I was not the primary target of harassment in either of these cases, I was subject to attacks, as I document later, as were other volunteer staff members in the group I was studying. Through my first-hand experiences in SL, it became clear that the problem is one that needed to be addressed by further research, and the conventional wisdom that one should simply not “feed the trolls” by paying attention to them underestimates the impact these malevolent individuals in some cases have on online groups and individuals (Film Crit Hulk, 2019). Through a rich description of these two cases – both of which, as of the time of this writing, continue to be problems within the community – I hope to contribute to the literature on online harassment and harassment prevention.

4. Method

4.1. Procedure

Data was collected in the Cypris Chat language learning community from 2008-2019; I still lead volunteer activities within this group on a twice-weekly basis and get regular updates on the two cases under discussion. The research methods utilized were primarily ethnographic and qualitative in nature, with a focus on semi-structured interviews, personal conversations held in voice and text chat within Second Life and via Facebook Messenger, and my own field notes on participant observation. Participant privacy and safety were primary concerns. Participants were given a notecard in Second Life outlining informed consent, on which they then typed their name on and returned a copy to me. Though SL is an anonymous platform, all participants (besides Cypris Chat director Mike McKay) have been given pseudonyms for the purpose of this study.

4.2. Cypris Chat

Before continuing, it is necessary to briefly describe the community that was affected in these two case studies, Cypris Chat, and to explain my connection to it. Cypris was formed in 2008 by McKay as an English language practice and learning community. Earlier that year, I had met up with McKay in Kobe, Japan, to discuss possible online collaborations between classes at the universities we were working at in the Kansai region of Japan. Though these collaborations never ended up taking

place because of administrative entanglements, McKay and I encountered three Japanese English learners in SL's now-defunct English Village: Show, Mistie, and Yumiko. These three were eager to learn English from university instructors in SL, and Mistie offered McKay a plot of virtual land to start a school. In December 2008, Cypris Chat was born. I agreed to be a charter member with the condition that I would be able to utilize members as research participants; I had recently started my doctoral program and was excited to find potential participants not linked to my *RL* (real life) students.

Cypris quickly grew from 5 charter members in 2008, to approximately 500 active members in 2011, and along with *Virtlantis* (Sobkowiak, 2014) became one of the most popular language education groups in SL. McKay did not consider the group to be a school (Duquette, 2011, p. 81); despite the popularity of classes taught by McKay, myself, and a growing number of other staff members, the space itself was a place for conversation, communication, and self-study. Besides the Chat Ring, where classes took place, there was a sandbox for collaborative building, a Star Trek style "holodeck" for role-play, and a tabletop gaming area where members and guests could chat over *Parcheesi*, *Greedy* and other popular SL board games. To enjoy Cypris Village, the area associated with the community, one only had to follow the basic tenets of the group: Share, Respect, Respond and Be Active (Duquette, 2017, p. 55-56). Notably, one also had to refrain from a discussion of politics or religion, which were taboo subjects within the group because of their volatility. Also, unlike other groups within SL, voice chat was, if not always prerequisite, highly encouraged. As of this writing in 2020, Cypris has shrunk considerably, although it still has about 30 active members and staff.

5. Case one: "Jason"

The following section outlines issues that Cypris Chat administrators, teachers, and members have had when confronting the problematic behavior of a particularly troublesome Second Life resident. It introduces the individual known as Jason and describes how he first became a problem within Cypris Chat. It then details several ways in which he disrupts activities and spreads disinformation. This section concludes by exploring ways the community has learned to defend itself against Jason and trolls and griefers like him.

5.1. Enter the Troll

In early 2010, Cypris Chat was bustling. The Cypris Chat activities calendar (<https://cyprischat.wixsite.com/home/activity-calendar>) was full, with often two to three classes or events per day. One could log in at almost any time of the day or night and find both native and non-native speakers chatting around the *Parcheesi* table or building in the sandbox. Cypris had a slew of new volunteer guides, native English speakers, or confident non-native speakers who would answer questions from new members as well as act as informal conversation moderators. One of these new guides was Dem. In RL, she was an epileptic Muslim woman from the San Francisco bay area who liked nothing more to play board games and chat with the more than 500 active members and visitors who would visit the sim. Dem was very talkative and had a reputation for monopolizing the conversation at times, not an ideal situation when guides at Cypris were ostensibly there to encourage non-native speaker members and guests. She was, however, friendly and enthusiastic.

One of these guests was a near-fluent English speaker who called himself Jason, though he would later assume many different names through many different accounts. It is unclear where Jason was from in RL, but from his accent, most members, myself included, assumed he was Russian. The many hours he spent at Cypris every day might also indicate that he was unemployed, and there were rumors that he might be disabled. He could most often be found sitting around the *Parcheesi* table, which was a major hub of activity between scheduled classes and activities at the time. For several weeks, Jason did not cause any real trouble. Although he spoke very little about his own offline

existence, he was curious about other residents' RLs. This was not unusual, as Cypris members were often very open about their lives offline. However, once Jason began to feel comfortable at the table and became well known to Cypris regulars, his behavior began to change.

Once Jason was aware of an interlocutor's nationality or religious beliefs, he would slowly steer the conversation towards topics that might provoke embarrassment or annoyance. For example, knowing that I and many staff members were living in Japan, he would often bring up contentious topics like whaling or World War II. Many non-native speakers lacked the language ability to realize he was intentionally provocative. However, native speakers and staff came to realize that Jason was not truly interested in practicing English nor in making friends. He was trolling. Several members ignored or tolerated his behavior, but Dem, one of the most outspoken and active new guides, did not.

This became an issue when Jason realized he could antagonize Dem by denigrating her religious and political beliefs in chat. To her credit, Dem ignored Jason's anti-Muslim rhetoric for some time, even when Jason brought a gigantic Israeli flag in-world that he would hold in his hand while making disparaging comments about the Palestinian occupation of Gaza. Finally, one weekend, Dem felt she had to stand up against Jason's increasingly hateful rhetoric, especially since several Malaysian Muslim members were also present. She angrily defended her Islamic beliefs and strongly voiced her opposition to Israel's behavior in Palestine. She then blocked and banned Jason from the sim – something Cypris guides were technically allowed to do, but only in extreme circumstances.

Jason immediately complained to manager Mistie and Professor Merryman (Mike McKay) about the situation. According to him, Dem had gone off on an anti-semitic rant and banned him unfairly; after talking to a few of the members present, Mistie and the Professor made the decision to strip Dem of her Cypris Guide status and kick her from the group, though Jason also remained banned for his own behavior. Jason had goaded Dem into breaking Cypris' rule forbidding discussion of religion and politics, which resulted in her dismissal from the group.

As this decision had not been discussed with the other Cypris volunteer staff, and Dem had not been given an opportunity to tell her side of the story, this immediately caused a rift within the group. Dem herself was shocked and upset and never returned to Cypris in any capacity. During the next weekly staff meeting, several members were upset by Professor and Mistie's decision to remove Dem without a staff vote or trial. One of them subsequently left Cypris and went to volunteer at Virtilantis, though he eventually came back to teach a few classes years later. That is not to say that everyone was unhappy with Dem's departure; she had been seen as brash and too talkative by some, even, ironically, by some of the Malaysian Muslim women she had been defending. However, Jason had scored a victory against the group.

5.2. From Troll to Griefer

Jason returned to Cypris in a different avatar with a different name, and the decision was made to give him a chance to "play nice." For several weeks, he refrained from obvious trolling, but it was not long before he began to target anyone whom he could initially fool into taking him seriously. He began attending classes with the intent of disrupting them, usually interrupting to focus insults on the teacher, tutor, or guide involved. This would inevitably lead to his avatar being kicked from the sim and eventually banned. This did not discourage Jason in the least.

Jason uses three main techniques to troll and grief within the group. The first is the use of multiple avatars. In SL, a new avatar can be created for free and within minutes (Schultz, 2018). Cypris staff have admin powers to ban avatars from the sim. However, whenever one of Jason's avatars was banned, he would often return minutes later with another and then another. Kicking and banning these avatars was a time consuming and annoying process, and it led to a climate of suspicion within the group where before there had only been warmth and encouragement towards potential members.

Previously, when an avatar with a freshly created account approached a staff member, they were welcomed as a new SL resident; now, they are scrutinized with some level of suspicion, at least until they can prove their identity through voice chat.

Jason's use of what eventually became more than a hundred multiple accounts fed into another of his strategies: character defamation through IMs. Jason would send messages to new members, and residents who were visiting the Cypris sim for the first time, and attempt to scare them off, usually by telling them that Cypris staff members were involved in suspicious activities or deviant sexual behavior and could not be trusted. He would also tie up staff members in lengthy IMs during activities with initially innocent questions and requests, only to later reveal with an insult that he had been deliberately wasting their time.

Jason had a different focus, depending on whom he was attacking. He attacked Mike McKay (Professor Merryman) for being a failed teacher who could only find respect in an online fantasy world. He accused staff members Hammond and Show of being sexual deviants. Mystie and other Japanese members were called "whale-killers" (because of Japan's stance on whaling). I, who only appeared to teach as part of my research agenda and therefore did not provide him much information to use against me, was simply accused of using SL to compensate for a small penis. His attacks on female members, as a YouTube video (now taken down,) showed, could be sexually charged and full of profanity and abuse.

Jason would occasionally disrupt classes, activities, and conversations through griefing objects. These are devices that would create or replicate in-world items that would cause serverside *lag*, using up resources and slowing or crashing Cypris members' computers. Since May 2018, he now utilizes some unknown method to avoid being entirely kicked from the Cypris sim. He has come to several classes and caused trouble in Voice Chat, and although his avatar was kicked, he was somehow able to keep talking in voice chat as if his avatar was still within the parcel. This has forced activity leaders, myself included, to leave and reconvene the class at a different, secret location created by Mistie outside of Cypris.

5.3. Defense Against Jason

Since Jason first arrived in early 2010, Cypris staff have done their best to reduce the impact he has had on the community. The first strategy was the use of self-defense education. The notecard below outlined precautions members needed to take to avoid being trolled and was distributed to all Cypris members shortly after Jason became a problem:

Self-defense in Cypris

1. Mute/Block - Right click on the avatar annoying you and choose Mute and Block
2. Contact one of the Cypris Officers by IM and explain what happened (Duke, Professor Merryman and Mistie are recommended for the moment). If the person bothering you is a member, we will contact them and ask them what happened. In general, three complaints will probably get the offender banned (this hasn't all been decided yet).

Bad things you don't want to do in Cypris

1. Pushing people around with your avatar, especially people you don't know. Better to apologize if you bump into someone, even if it's just because of lag.

2. Asking too many personal questions. Nationality is probably okay to ask, but age, sexual orientation, income are not something you want to repeatedly ask someone.
3. Sexual harassment. The rules are the same here as in real life.
4. "You're from Japan? So why do you like killing whales?"
5. Weapons
6. Griefing

Try to have a sense of humor about things, though. You are (almost) always in complete control of the situation. Just mute/block someone if they are being annoying and you will never have to talk with them again.

(Self-defense in Cypris, April 8, 2010)

Although this original notecard was written by the staff in simple English, it was still difficult to understand for some members with limited English ability. Simplified revisions were created, and in March of 2011, I myself wrote a lesson plan that integrated discussion of SL self-defense techniques for use in my classes. However, since new visitors were continually touring Cypris and new members were being added all the time, staff members have had to explain such strategies and group norms at regular intervals.

Beyond member education, senior staff members bought devices to make kicking and banning avatars easier. A security orb system was purchased, and all senior staff provided HUDs (heads up displays) for use in the SL browser to utilize this system. Individual staff members, including myself, bought HUDs that alerted us to suspicious incoming avatars faster. The welcome area was cordoned off as a space for anyone to visit, but outside this area, one's SL account needed to be at least two weeks old (SL age) or one would be automatically booted from the sim; this was designed to prevent Jason from making new avatars to bring in as fast as staff could ban them.

Finally, a Facebook Messenger group, Griefer Sightings, was made to share information about Jason and all his aliases. The group is not limited to Cypris; Jason, it seems, continues to troll Virlantis, *Edunation*, and other language practice and learning sims within SL as well. Despite ostensibly being a group for reporting griefing incidents of all kinds, a vast majority of posts involve reporting Jason's newest avatars, sharing his profile pics (which often contain his preferred alias "Swairard" and a comical cartoon duck, as well as YouTube videos of his behavior (Schneider, 2018). All of this information is provided with the intention of minimizing Jason's impact on classes and providing a sense of comradery in dealing with a troll who has continued his campaign of harassment against SL language learning communities for almost a decade now.

6. Case Two: "Mario"

The following section outlines how one Cypris Chat member dealt with a jealous cyberstalker referred to as Mario. First, it introduces Mario, explains his likely motivations, and describes his first acts of targeted SL griefing within Cypris. Next, it shows the ways in which Mario attempted to provoke fear and anxiety within his target, both in Second Life and on other online platforms. It concludes by admitting to the limited options available in dealing with this particular brand of determined harassment in Second Life.

6.1. A Jealous Ex

Although I had, for the most part, managed to avoid being targeted by Jason in his campaign against Cypris, this was not the case with a cyberstalker, Mario. I first encountered him in an SL sim outside Cypris. I had been invited there by a Cypris member, Romie, to see the tail end of a live SL concert. Romie was a near-fluent English learner from eastern Europe, a volunteer guide at Cypris, and an important participant in my dissertation research. I also considered her a friend. Little did I know that my attendance at that event would end up having very negative ramifications for Romie, Cypris, and myself.

As we stood in the back of a crowd of well-dressed avatars, enjoying the music, Romie mentioned that there was someone there that she knew, her ex-boyfriend Mario. As dating within SL is common, I didn't think much of it, and Romie did not seem particularly concerned about this situation. Mario was standing a few rows behind us but did not approach us or introduce himself. Later, Romie explained that his English was very poor, and there would have been very little he could have said; his native language was Italian. I felt a little awkward in this situation, and when the concert ended about 15 minutes later, I said good-bye to Romie and logged off.

I forgot about Mario for several weeks since I was busy with both my Cypris research and another project, participant observation in the Bó'ài Hónglián Firefly Companion's Guild, a role-playing finishing school community within SL (The Firefly Companion's Guild, n.d.). The Companion's Guild congregates for casual chat sessions in a Japanese style public bath within SL, and while I was soaking in this virtual bath chatting with the other members, I noticed an avatar lurking in the far corner of the sim. I panned my camera over there and discovered a very odd and dirty avatar wearing mismatched clothes and sitting alone. Almost immediately, I received a text message from this person in English, praising me as "handsome," confirming my suspicions that he had been spying on me and the other Companion's Guild bathers. My first thought was that it must be Jason, and I warned the sim owner, who immediately put that avatar on the ban list.

The next day Mistie, the Cypris manager, showed me a texture image that an unknown avatar had been circulating at Cypris earlier that day. It was a photo collage of my naked avatar relaxing in the public bath from the previous day with my avatar's name and the title "the great professor". Mistie was aware of my work with the Companion's Guild (and as a Japanese person used to onsen hot spring culture, was not at all concerned about my nudity within a public bath), but I apologized for the embarrassment it might be causing her, and I again mistakenly fingered Jason as the likely culprit. This photo appeared several more times during the next month, including once as a huge billboard built just outside Cypris (Mistie had to contact the owner of the neighboring sim to have it removed). More disturbingly to me, members of my Friends list in SL had been sent the pic, which meant my account had likely been hacked. I apologized to those who received it, at least one who reported being deeply disturbed by the image, and changed my Second Life password.

6.2. Bringing RL into SL

I soon learned two revelatory facts from Romie. First, Mario had been the one who had been behind the campaign to attempt to embarrass me. He had been jealous of Romie's participation at Cypris and assumed that I was her new SL boyfriend. Also, Romie's previous relationship with Mario hadn't only been in SL; she had spent time with him on other online platforms and had even traveled to Italy, his home country, to visit him. Although Romie had tried to distance herself from Mario politely, he refused to break off their long-distance relationship. It was then that his behavior took a disturbing turn.

In SL, he began a campaign of RL "revenge porn" against Romie; revenge porn is here defined as harassment occurring "when someone (commonly an ex-partner) takes a sexual image and

distributes it online without the consent of the individual depicted in the image” (Starr & Lavis, 2018, p. 427). He created an avatar with her RL name as its account name and a nude photo of her in RL as the profile picture. He also distributed this photo to unsuspecting classes at Cypris. He also later created avatars that included links to websites that would reveal user IP addresses; Romie asserted that Mario was a hacker and was likely trying to track her, not Cypris members.

Although his avatars were banned from entering Cypris as soon as they were discovered, he would continue his campaign of intimidation by lurking in a women’s clothing store on the property just outside Cypris. From the edge of the Cypris parcel, we would build objects that would stretch into Cypris while still remaining officially outside the sim. This was likely the way he vandalized the haunted house Romie had helped build for Halloween in October 2016, inserting ghostly images of a nude photo of her in the house before they were discovered during an activity. Although Romie temporarily left Cypris to avoid this harassment, Mario still continues to leave one of his avatars in the commercial space just outside Cypris, a reminder that if she should return, he will know about it.

Outside of SL, Mario’s cyberstalking became even worse. He sent Romie email after email, sometimes begging her to return to him, sometimes threatening her. He stalked her on all of her social networks and chat platforms to the point where she gave up on online interaction altogether. Romie began to seriously fear for her safety and even went so far as to buy pepper spray to carry with her. Finally, when he sent her a photo of a police car in her hometown taken that very day, intimating that he was nearby, Romie went to the local police and explained the situation.

As of November 2019, Romie has continued to come to Cypris activities in different avatars. She initially did not use voice chat in the group for fear that she would be rediscovered by Mario, who always seemed to be lurking just outside the Cypris property boundary. Recently, though, Romie comes and brings her friends, and has determined not to be silenced. Though Mario’s avatars can still be seen lurking at the edges of Cypris, he has not returned to actively harass Romie, myself, or other Cypris members.

6.3. Defense Against Mario

Mario was particularly difficult to defend against because his goals were different from Jason’s. While Jason was there to disrupt conversations, lessons, and activities, Mario was there to humiliate and intimidate, first me and then Romie. Mario’s knowledge of SL scripting allowed him to place objects and images without his avatar being present, and his way of leaving an avatar just outside the boundaries of Cypris provoked anxiety that he might try something at any minute. Mario took full advantage of the knowledge he had about Romie to make her life, both on and offline, as uncomfortable as possible through the use of revenge porn. Although Mistie and other staff warned members not to accept unsolicited messages with attachments, there was very little staff could do to make sure Mario’s pics of Romie did not go unseen.

The only defense against Mario was simply to refuse to be embarrassed. Romie was mortified by Mario’s actions, and she initially left Cypris and cut off communications with all Cypris members on social media, including myself. However, Mistie and myself sent her encouragement through email, and slowly Romie began communicating with Cypris members again. The staff of Cypris to their credit remained supportive and understanding throughout Romie’s ordeal, and despite Mario’s continued surveillance, Romie now regularly attends Cypris activities again.

7. Discussion

The following section looks at lessons that can be drawn from the two previous exemplars of online community bad actors like Jason and Mario. It first identifies why Cypris Chat and public

educational groups are particularly vulnerable to griefers and stalkers. It then explores the misguided impulse to negotiate with these individuals or rationalize their actions. It concludes by admitting that within Second Life, a virtual world that values personal expression and user privacy, tolerance of trolling, grieving, and (to at least some extent,) stalking seems to be a price residents must pay.

7.1. Griefers Do What They Do Where They Can

Cypris Chat, and indeed many volunteer educational sims in SL are uniquely vulnerable to trolls, griefers, and cyberstalkers for several reasons. First, these sims have to be open to the public to survive. Curious potential members need to be able to look around and see if the community, classes, and services are something they are interested in. If an educational sim allows only existing group members to enter, this leaves little opportunity to recruit new members or regular visitors. Virtlantis, another well-known language learning community, discovered this when, in response to Jason's constant harassment, they made the decision to close off their land to non-members. This strategy made the sim safe for preexisting members, but overall membership dwindled. On the other hand, it has been suggested by previous members that the *Meow Meow* English chat community (Meow meow café, <https://world.secondlife.com/group/eb65ce4e-287c-c830-0c6f-8c5b55a5b699?lang=en-US>) disappeared because it was too open; with few restrictions on conversation, Jason had more freedom to antagonize more individuals. A welcome area open to newcomers and an account age limit for the rest of the sim, as implemented in Cypris, seemed a reasonable compromise, a way to maintain membership numbers while discouraging hastily-created griefer avatars.

Educational communities are also particularly vulnerable because they are predictable. Classes and activities are posted with a set time and location, allowing griefers to know when and where to strike. This may seem like a given, but not all groups function this way. In the Companion's Guild, for example, classes and events take place in several different locations, and the schedule is only available to members. I did encounter trolls and cyberstalkers within that community during my participant observation, but when they were removed from that group, their ability to harass their targets diminished greatly.

Volunteer educational groups are also magnets for troublemakers in SL because they are often unable to afford an entire sim. If one can't afford your own island region, \$100 USD to start, and \$229 every month afterwards (Second Life, 2019), there is a good chance one of your neighbors will have public space allotted in their area. As long as any space is publicly accessible within a sim, it is particularly vulnerable to trolls, griefers, and stalkers.

Finally, educational groups are vulnerable because they involve residents' offline lives. In many groups within SL, the Companion's Guild included, residents often role-play as characters developed around their avatar. This means that personal information about residents' lives, information like their nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and even gender, is not necessarily discussed. The more trolls, griefers, and cyberstalkers know about their targets' real lives, the easier it is to tease, annoy, and frighten them.

7.2. No Reasoning with the Unreasonable

Reading the Griefer Sightings group on Facebook Messenger, I see the same kind of incredulous armchair psychology over and over; everyone is trying to understand why Jason does what he does. "Seems to me like a guy with a kind of social disorder looking for attention." "I suspect he doesn't have a boss . . . possibly unemployed." "I've talked with someone that Jason is stalking. Seems he does that only for his EGO. He also blackmails people in RL, even threatens a marriage." All of these teaching professionals and students are looking for reasons why someone should spend several

hours of each day for a decade interrupting language learning classes online. Nearly all of them have spent fruitless hours trying to reason with him.

Negotiation is unlikely to work with bad actors like Jason and Mario. Trolls and griefers treat negotiation as performance art. This is simply another way to waste their victims' time and annoy them. Stalkers are driven by different desires but are equally unlikely to give up. Both these types of individuals are often patient, methodical, and relentless. Whether or not they could be diagnosed as mentally ill, they exhibit characteristics of Antisocial Personality Disorder such as ego-centrism, personal gratification, lack of empathy, and troubles maintaining intimacy (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). Although kicking, muting, blocking, and banning may only be a temporary solution, on a platform of consequence-free anonymity, they sometimes remain the only option. One cannot reason with the unreasonable.

7.3. Linden Lab: A Hands-Off Policy

From 2011 to the present, Cypris and other language learning communities made multiple attempts to reach Linden Lab to complain about Jason and Mario's malevolent behavior. The results were disappointing for Cypris members. True, Mario's behavior posting of nude photos along with RL information in an avatar profile resulted in that account being temporarily frozen and said photo removed. However, as of this writing, that account still exists, without a picture, and even after three years, Linden Lab has not deleted it. "Be good and Do good - Smile and Let it Go :)" has been left as a taunting message on the front page of the profile. Additionally, there is no evidence available that Linden Lab has ever disciplined Jason or any of his hundreds of accounts. It could be argued that blocking his IP address could have made all his accounts unusable, but it is not impossible to get a new one. Regardless, Mystie and Cypris Chat management have not received any feedback from Linden Lab in regard to their many official complaints against Jason and Mario.

Frustration with Linden Lab is tempered by acceptance at Cypris. Second Life is a platform that allows Cypris members to receive cost-free English language lessons and meet people from around the world all in the safety and comfort of their own home. Arguably Linden Lab's reluctance to discipline is the dark side of Linden Lab's adherence to principles of freedom, anonymity, and the fostering of emergent behavior. Tolerance of malevolent behavior amongst its residents may be a necessary evil. Linden Lab has experimented with more control in *Sansar* (Linden Lab, 2019), a next generation virtual world platform with better graphics and smoother performance, but less freedom to interact and create. The lack of user traffic in Sansar has been disappointing, and the lack of freedom there has been blamed (Au, 2019).

8. Final Thoughts

Second Life is much smaller than it was in 2011 when Jason first teleported into Cypris to cause trouble. The population of active users has shrunk. Large educational institutions have moved away. The kind of virtual schooling envisioned in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011) must wait for another platform; Second Life is not the Oasis. But the lessons that have been learned in Second Life about security, grieving, and stalking are valuable to future teachers, administrators, researchers, and game designers, not because they applicable elsewhere, but because a laboratory environment of such determined freedom and self-responsibility will be unlikely to be replicated elsewhere any time soon. In an early mission statement, Linden Lab states that "it is our mission to connect us all to an online world that advances the human condition" (Malaby, 2009, p. 135). However, the anonymity Linden Lab felt integral to this utopian vision, an emphasis on offline privacy that protects the rights of private individuals, does not necessarily work in every kind of public group. When given the

freedom to do or be anything they want in a community, there will always be some people who choose to be horrible.

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