WHAT DREAMS MAY COME: RITUAL PERFORMANCE AS LEGITIMIZATION

OF GENDERED INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY IN SECOND LIFE

by

ALICIA BETH CORTS

(Under the Direction of Marla Carlson)

ABSTRACT

Research into virtual worlds has overlooked how performance has influenced the
categorization and standardization of gendered performance in these worlds. This
dissertation investigates how the specific habitus of Second Life grew from its earliest
days in 2002 until 2012. The original world was an open space of potentials, one in which
a multitude of gender performances became available that played with commonly held
first-life norms. Using Brian Massumi's notion of the positional grid, this study
demonstrates how early Second Life residents challenged the first-life binary positions of
male/female, but how that same group came to need a way of reading gender despite the
anonymity of other users and the veiling of the biological body. Rather than doing away
with these new gender categories, residents of Second Life instituted ritual performances
of birth and marriage as one means to regulate and control gender in this particular virtual
world. Using participant observation, in-depth interviews, and archival research, the
study traces the evolution of these performances and society has tightened controls
surrounding birth and marriage to normalize them. This research points to ways that new

virtual worlds may extend the possibility of gender play while cautioning that virtual

citizens will find specific regulatory devices to control new gender performances.

INDEX WORDS: Virtual worlds; Second Life; Identity; Gender studies; Gender and

technology; Ritual performance; Avatar performance; Virtual

communities; Online Identity

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DEDICATION

Soli Deo Gloria.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds offer a new place of performance and play. Users wander these

landscapes in bodies with capabilities far beyond those of the biological body. Among

these worlds, Second Life has carved a reputation for being a space where users have the

highest degree of control. Second Life is a persistent virtual world, an environment

"implemented by a computer (or network of computers) that simulates an environment"

in a way that allows users to share information within a persistent space.[1] Users in the

physical world craft a highly detailed digital body called an avatar. By performing

through that avatar, the user grows into a resident of the world who understands how

society functions in the virtual space. An avatar is simply a digital representation of a

body, but Mark Meadows describes a Second Life resident as a fully-present member of

society capable of interacting with other avatars and moving within the environment.[2]

Millions of people have created an avatar and started the journey toward becoming a

resident in virtual worlds, and Second Life, started in 2002 by Linden Lab, has several

thousand residents online at any given moment. This world relies on its residents as the

primary developers of content. Over ninety percent of what can be seen in Second Life is

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[1] Richard A. Bartle, *Designing Virtual Worlds* (Indianapolis, IN: New Riders, 2004), 1.

[2] Mark Stephen Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life* (New York: New Riders Press, 2007), 68.

made by residents.[3] Cory Ondrejka, one of the original Linden Lab developers responsible for the world, calls Second Life a place where users "create iteratively and interactively" to develop content and "a strong and diverse social network."[4] Second Life advertises itself as a place where residents craft their environment, their digital bodies, and performances free from any limitations except their own imaginations: "Your World. Your Imagination."

While the world is advertised as a place where residents are without constraint, virtual society has developed regulations controlling a variety of behaviors. Residents place some of the most stringent regulations on the gendering of the avatar body and the performances available to those avatars based on their gendered choices. Avatars can take the shape of different species, aliens, inanimate objects, or humans. These unusual bodies can appear to be without first-life binary gender roles. With the digital avatar body of Second Life, users cannot connect the avatar body back to the biological body of the user, meaning that gender, at first glance, can be changed from first-life categories or avoided altogether. N. Katherine Hayles describes a computer user's body as the "present in the flesh" body on one side of the screen,[5] a body that is masked by the anonymity of the

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[3] Cory Ondrejka, "Escaping the Gilded Cage: User-Created Content and Building the Metaverse," in *The State of Play: Law, Games, and Virtual Worlds*, eds. Jack M. Balkin and Beth Simone Noveck (New York City: New York University Press, 2006), 153.

[4] Ibid., 149-50.

[5] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xiii.

virtual space. A barrier exists between the user's digital representation and the biological body, which can be seen and verified in the physical world. Without the biological marker, gender becomes untethered from the body, theoretically loosening the constraints of gender for Second Life residents.

Residents quickly recognized that the avatar body might not match the biological body. A user could gender-switch and pass as the chosen gender for extended periods of time. Second Life society became aware of these deceptions, but without the biological body, residents found it difficult to quickly identify residents engaging in gender-switching. This constant possibility of gender deception caused chaos within the burgeoning Second Life society. The body is one of the key markers of identity, and as Judith Donath points out, without that marker, residents had a hard time knowing who they were communicating with:

> Knowing the identity of those with whom you communicate is essential for understanding and evaluating an interaction. Yet in the disembodied world of the virtual community, identity is also ambiguous. Many of the basic cues about personality and social role we are accustomed to in the physical world are absent….In the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity.[6]

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[6] Judith Donath, "Identity and the Virtual Community," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, eds. Peter Kollock and Marc Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 29.

A male or female avatar body stands as a marker for a gendered identity, but with no way to verify that the user's body matches that marker. This anonymity became an issue as intimate relationships developed inworld. Early residents created areas for romance and sexual play that became some of the most visited and popular in the new world.[7] Many sexual encounters were momentary flings, but in long-term intimate relationships, society looked for ways to stabilize residents' gendered performances.

Judith Butler states that the biological body holds the "cultural meaning and form" for gender construction, making it the visible marker of first-life society's gender construction.[8] This convenient gender marker is absent in Second Life. Instead of the biological body, virtual society has come to rely almost exclusively on "stylized repetition of acts" that gives the illusion of a stable identity through "bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds."[9] In the virtual realm, without the physical body as a marker, residents are hyperaware of gender performance since nearly every aspect of a virtual body is divorced from the biological body. The avatar body is completely constructed by the user. Users can easily switch genders, and gender play is a common practice for both male and female users. Kyra Grossman found that over seventy percent

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[7] Wagner James Au, *The Making of Second Life: Notes from the New World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 61.

[8] Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Fallaize (New York: Routledge, 1998), 30.

[9] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 179.

of both male and female users engaged in gender play during their second lives.[10] Without the restrictions of first-life biology, Second Life society developed specific practices and performances to stabilize gender. These implicit regulations guide residents' decisions without revealing the cultural constructions behind them. Every resident has control over her environment, but invisible societal rules guide her selections in everything from shaping her digital body to determining how that body will perform inworld. Most importantly, these accepted behaviors and choices normalize gender performance.

This dissertation focuses on the development of two critical regulatory performances designed to reduce the discomfort surrounding the possibility of gender-switching in Second Life: virtual birth and marriage performances. These performances have become ritualized to impress upon the performers the importance of remaining in recognizable gender roles within the Second Life playing space, leading to culturally legible bodies that give the illusion of gender stability. The culture surrounds romantic relationships and the notion of family with these performances to prevent unexpected revelations of gender disparity between the presented avatar body and the user behind it.

Birth and marriage performance developed as the answer to society's unease with gender in the virtual space. These performances do not appear on the surface as regulatory devices. Clinic owners and wedding planners tout these rituals as fantastic, playful performances, and Second Life residents give birth and state their vows without

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[10] Kyra Grosman, "An Exploratory Study of Gender Swapping and Gender Identity in Second Life," PhD diss., The Wright Institute, 2010.

considering the history behind why these performances developed. Most importantly, these performances have become ritualized so that the elements of the performance remain stable. Ritual enacts Second Life society's categorization of gender because such performances are "patterned, repetitive, and symbolic enactment of a cultural belief or value."[11] To ensure that these values are performed correctly, birth and marriage have become repetitive performances that use symbolic elements patterned on society's beliefs about gender. This set of societal beliefs arose from the early days of Second Life's history when gender play and romantic relationships mixed and issues of sexuality arose. Residents who go against the regulations surrounding birth and marriage risk losing social, cultural, and economic standing in the virtual community. Despite the danger to such performers, Second Life remains a space where the potential exists for residents to perform marriage and birth rituals outside of the virtual gender norms. This dissertation investigates how society gives the illusion of stability to these gendered performances but has failed to completely limit the potential for non-conforming performance.

The next chapter of this dissertation describes how these rituals became normalized and the society's regulations rendered invisible. Using Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus, I examine how the tastes and expectations of Second Life society dictate who can perform marriage and birth and what elements these performers can use within their performances. Habitus works as an invisible web of regulations that subtly controls all aspects of virtual life, and Second Life society built up these performance boundaries as a

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[11] Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 8.

way of keeping gender deception under control. Through this history, Second Life's suspicion of the female avatar body emerges as the basis for habitus surrounding gender.

Chapter three investigates how the interactions between residents led to the construction of habitus and how those rules position the avatar body on a gendered matrix. I use Brian Massumi's work on the positional grid and the open event space to describe how interactions between residents took away the possibility of gender play within relationships. As avatar bodies became defined through these interactions, a positional grid developed that made gender a legible performance inworld. Rituals encompass the regulations necessary to keep gender stable in intimate relationships, so birth and marriage act as devices used to lash avatar bodies to gendered grid positions.

The fourth chapter details my study of marriage performances during 2012. The weddings I observed during my study follow a specific ritual pattern, and gendered norms emerge from the performance's elements. Wedding planners take the role of the high priest for the ritual, guiding participants to the proper and necessary elements for the performance. While couples are led to believe that they have control over their special day, the wedding planners, who take the role of the officiant as well, approve each part of the ceremony to keep gendered roles stable throughout the ceremony. A case study illustrates how one couple follows the guidelines for the ritual and how their social circle rewards their investment of social and cultural capital. The fifth chapter features two case studies of performers who attempt to break out of the bounds of the marriage ritual to perform gender differently. One resident attempts to use the ritual as a way to perform an unmasking of her user's body, and she fails to escape the gendered grid position society has in mind for her. Another resident mischievously moves from feminine to masculine

performance throughout the performance, leaving wedding guests wondering which gender this resident wishes them to observe and approve.

Chapter Six details my observances of birth rituals as well as my time as a student at a Second Life medical school. Just as wedding planners guide couples toward the proper marriage ritual elements, Second Life doctors and midwives tightly control birth performance inworld. Not only do these virtual birth practitioners repeat the performance, but the training reiterates the importance of gender in both the virtual doctor and those he treats. The demanding apprenticeship instills a suspicion of gender-switching birth performers as well as conveying to the new doctors and midwives the importance of their own gendered performance. More clearly controlled by overt methods than marriage, birth ritual results in performances that are near carbon copies of each other. The female avatar body is stabilized through these performances, but when the high priest's control is avoided, the gendered norms within the performance become unstable as well. A contrasting case study demonstrates how a birth performance can challenge virtual gender norms rather than perpetuating them.

My research leads to the conclusion that while Second Life began as an open world of creativity, the cultural norms that have developed make it impossible for gender play to exist in intimate relationships. The social world has developed a tightly controlled matrix of behaviors, and society now tightly controls the freedom needed for true identity play inworld. While the company still proclaims that residents and their creativity drive virtual society, Second Life is currently not a place where a resident can easily step outside of regulated gender performances, though the potential for gender play still exists in this virtual world.

Importance of Study

Anthropologist and Second Life ethnographer Tom Boellstorff points to gender as one of the most intriguing areas of possible research in this virtual world, even saying he "could happily write an entire book on gender…in Second Life."[12] Despite the large interest in virtual world research, including the Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education annual conference inworld that last year attracted over 2000 presenters and attendees, no study has been done on how Second Life society has historically categorized avatar bodies and their performances.[13] This study is the first of its kind in examining how performance solidifies gender categories in Second Life. The closest study is Robert Alan Brookey and Kristopher L. Cannon's investigation of sexuality in Second Life. Using Michel Foucault's notion of the docile body, they explain how the disciplined avatar body marginalizes certain sexual practices within the virtual world.[14] What they do not explore is how the avatar became docile and disciplined in the first place. How did a world that started as an open space with few cultural norms develop a strict set of social norms governing the body in less than a decade?

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[12] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 139.

[13] Virtual Worlds Best Practices in Education annual report, 2012, available at http://ejournal.urockcliffe.com/index.php/JOVS/article/viewFile/25/4, 13.

[14] Robert Alan Brookey and Kristopher L. Cannon, "Sex Lives in Second Life," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009): 145-64.

Other researchers looking into virtual worlds other than Second Life have vacillated between calling virtual worlds open spaces for gender play and closed areas that mimic first-world norms. There has not been a framework to look at how virtual world societies create gendered performance guidelines to alleviate the discomfort with the veiled biological body. Researchers have wrestled with the question of how gender appears in virtual worlds without looking at the regulatory mechanisms guiding performances. Some research points to virtual worlds as places where gender restrictions disappear. Amy Bruckman concludes that these worlds are "identity workshops" where the interaction with the computer world changes how we view our identities, including aspects like gender.[15] Sherry Turkle believes users of virtual worlds have the power to create different identities and engage in "identity transforming relationships" that disrupt conventional gender categories.[16] She declares that virtual environments open up the possibility for each user to understand the construction of gender:

> By enabling people to experience what it "feels" like to be the opposite gender or to have no gender at all, the practice [of creating an avatar] encourages reflection on the way ideas about gender shape our expectations. MUDS and the virtual personae one adopts in them are

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[15] Amy Bruckman, "Gender Swapping on the Internet," in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace,* ed. Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 323.

[16] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 9.

objects-to-think with for reflecting on the social construction of gender.[17]
Turkle's argument is that because each user has the ability to create his physical
representation—even choosing bodies which ignore first-life gender categories in favor
of animals, machines, inanimate objects, and mythical creatures—these virtual world
users can escape the gendered restrictions on their performances and objectively consider
gender's role in first-life society. Turkle and Bruckman wrote about the possibility of
open identity play in the early days of the internet before the graphics-rich world of
Second Life, raising the possibility that the visual aspect hinders gender play. Despite
that hesitation, neither Turkle nor Bruckman discuss or investigate how a virtual culture
can bind gendered performance, and I would argue that no virtual space can be deemed
an open space for gender play without investigating the cultural boundaries particular to
that virtual world.

On the opposite side of the argument, researchers such as Lori Kendall argue that
the creation of new gender categories in virtual worlds simply reestablishes the
male/female binary through their appearance and behavior. Rather than making gender
construction clear, as Turkle suggests, Kendall proposes that we continue to mask the
construction of gender in play that mimics the binary.[18] While a user may choose a car as
the avatar body, that car will be constructed with feminine or masculine colors or features
that determine how other users interact with that avatar. The virtual world will have its

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[17] Ibid., 213.

[18] Lori Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

own set of rules governing gender, but Kendall argues these regulations will still result in a binary. Again, this research focuses on observations about current gender performance in virtual worlds without looking for the mechanisms guiding those performances.

While several researchers have worked with gender in virtual worlds in general, few have taken on the task of examining Second Life gender performance specifically. Robert Alan Brookey and Kristopher Cannon report that gender categories are expanding even as sexual behaviors are being regulated, while Delia Dumitrica and Georgia Gade claim that the avatar body can never escape its gendered, oppressive origins in the patriarchal system of Linden Lab.[19] In both studies, the researchers bring a first-life understanding of gender to their observations of the virtual world, often missing the complex social relationships and structures keeping gender legible. Other research into Second Life assumes gender categories arising from the first-life binary: male, female, and a separate category for those avatars who choose to live without gender.

Most Second Life gender research discusses how gender can be performed within the categories already established rather than discussing how the categories were formed in the first place. Edward Castronova has written two studies on the economics of Second Life's virtual marketplace, but his rare mention of gender is primarily concerned with the

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[19] Brookey and Cannon, "Sex Lives in Second Life," 147; Delia Dumitrica and Georgia Gaden, "Knee-High Boots and Six-Pack Abs: Autoethnographic Reflections on Gender and Technology in Second Life," *Journal of Virtual Worlds* 1, no. 3 (2009): 3-23.

erasure of gender discrimination based on the equal abilities of male and female avatars.[20] Castronova represents one type of Second Life research in which gender is considered after the body is categorized rather than investigating how the digital body becomes gendered. In a lecture to the Chicago Humanities Festival, Boellstorff similarly assumes that the first-world binary exists in Second Life along with a third category of "unknown." When asked whether gender is something avatars could escape, he responds by pointing out that gender stereotypes carry over into the virtual world.[21] Boellstorff presumes that gender works the same way in the virtual world as it does in first life, a proposition this dissertation seeks to refute. Without the biological body as a marker to identify and categorize each avatar, the question remains how gender transfers into the virtual world. The continued references to Second Life as a gendered world lack a true understanding of the parameters of that performance, creating a place where technology interacts with gender in a way that is unavoidable but yet invisible.[22]

This study uncovers the ways society has categorized gender within this particular virtual world and shows how the interaction between this virtual society and the gendered

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[20] Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[21] Tom Boellstorff, "The Virtual Body: Coming of Age in Second Life," YouTube Video, 52:18, posted by ChicagoHumanites, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmghOAY01aI, posted November 29, 2010.

[22] Lisbet van Zoonen, "Gendering the Internet: Claims, Controversies and Cultures," *European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 1 (2002): 5-23.

performances of its inhabitants has shaped a multi-layered regulatory system for gender. Rather than assuming the gender binary simply transferred from first life into the virtual world or resting in a utopian ideal of gender in an anonymous environment, this dissertation investigates how this particular virtual world carved out gender categories from its earliest days. Virtual society made decisions regarding gender's potential in Second Life, and its decisions about what behaviors would be considered appropriate are embedded into new residents and determine how gender is performed today. Habitus, in its most basic definition, is a system that regulates social norms, which in turn dictates performance for the members of that society. In Bourdieu's definition, habitus represents "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures, that is, a principle of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules."[23] Habitus acts as an invisible web guiding residents of Second Life through paths of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, masking its own existence through the belief that the regulations are "natural." Revealing these rules and norms guides us to a clearer picture of the constraints placed on avatars and their performance.

In addition, focusing on Second Life specifically helps to show how a virtual world can begin with relatively open gender regulations and move to more tightly controlled performances. Rather than attempting to theorize about virtual worlds in general, my goal is to understand how one particular world's technology, history, and

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[23] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72.

users combined to fashion gender norms that work specifically for that society. I utilize both an emic (from the perspective of a Second Life resident) and etic (as a researcher looking into the virtual world with first-life understanding) stance within the study. The etic approach uses first-life gender studies as a means of analyzing and interpreting data taken from an emic viewpoint. By spending years within Second Life, I have been able to identify societal norms regulating my avatar, but more importantly, I can look at those norms from a position in first life.

Taking a historical as well as ethnographic approach also places importance on the development of gender within these spaces. Boellstorff, for example, bases his work in the historical side of Second Life because he believes the program derived from previous technology such as the telegraph and earlier worlds such as George Lucas' *Habitat*.[24] These technologies, he asserts, included the ability to spontaneously change the avatar body and keep the first-life body anonymous, two key features in Second Life. The connections to previous technologies is are fascinating for an in-depth understanding of how virtual worlds developed, but in the cases Boellstorff cites, the culture surrounding the technology was quite different than the one involving Second Life. He uses the example of marriages taking place over the telegraph as a correlation to Second Life marriages: since telegraph operators couldn't see each other's bodies, Boellstorff believes virtual reality users and telegraph operators operate in parallel ways. Telegraph weddings, or weddings by wire, took place in a time when a woman's freedom was controlled more tightly by her family. In 1880, for example, a Chinese emigrant named

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[24] Boellstorff, "The Virtual Body."

Sun Lee began a relationship with Miss Minnie Lee, a woman who lived a hundred miles away, over the telegraph.[25] They agreed to be married over the wire, and each had a minister meet them at the telegraph office to oversee the marriage. After the story was published in the newspaper, Minnie's brother questioned the marriage's validity in court, and the marriage was declared null and void. In terms of gender, there are distinct differences between this story and a wedding in Second Life. First, Minnie and Sun both had their biological bodies seen and verified by both the ministers and the newspapers covering the event. Second, both were well-known members of their communities, and their gender was controlled by first-life norms, not by the rules of the telegraph world. Second Life avatars immerse themselves in a new world where the culture embraces the anonymity of the avatar and where family is who you choose in the virtual space. Boellstorff is right in pointing out the history of the virtual, but ignoring the specificity of Second Life's societal norms oversimplifies the problem of gender in this virtual world. This study demonstrates the place of Second Life history in the construction of virtual gender norms.

The assumption that there is historical continuity in relation to technology and gender can also lead to a belief that first-life norms are the ones governing every virtual world. Sue-Ellen Case, for example, views the avatar as an "animation of the code

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[25] Don Lane, *Tahoe Tales of Historic Times and Unforgettable People* (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris, 2008), 418-9.

of…gender," one that is always inscribed by the traditions of the physical world.[26] That view of gender assumes that first-life norms transfer seamlessly to the virtual world. Yet since many gender norms are based in the biological body as a marker, this view negates the uniqueness of the virtual environment. The history of Second Life society doesn't always follow with the traditions of first life, and similarly, the performances of birth and marriage do not contain the same ritual elements or have the same significance to the performance of gender. In Second Life, seeing a female avatar in a wedding dress shows a user dedicated to the performance of femininity. The same ritual element in first-life traditionally links a woman to virginal purity and filial devotion, both of which originate with the biological body of the bride.[27] The virtual world takes those symbols and changes them to reflect the unease surrounding the veiled biological body.

This dissertation looks at gender from a performance perspective considering the historical and cultural shifts to the performance of gender within this virtual world, a direction not previously attempted by other scholars. While the study is particular to Second Life, this new approach to the consideration of gender in virtual worlds adds performance analysis to an understanding of virtual society. By introducing performance studies into the discussion of these spaces, we can examine not just how the residents fashion the world but how they perform in the space as well.

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[26] Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Science and the Virtual* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 47, 163-4.a

[27] Susanne Friese, "A Consumer Good in the Ritual Process," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 47-58.

Conventions

Second Life residents have ways of interacting that are specific to their culture, and I've attempted to replicate their performances as much as possible throughout this dissertation. In order to accomplish this task, I've used a number of conventions to help the reader distinguish between first-life references and inworld performance. First, all avatar names appear in italics. Second Life residents who arrived prior to 2012 chose a first name and were given a last name from a series of last names approved by Linden Lab. After 2012, all new Second Life users were given the last name Resident.

Second, I have maintained a level of anonymity for participants who I observed or with whom I spoke directly with inside Second Life. I have given the avatars who participated in my study pseudonyms that match the spirit of the avatar names these users had chosen for themselves, an important distinction within virtual worlds. Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pierce, and T.L. Taylor point to anonymity in virtual worlds as a critical component to successful research.[28] They point to numerous examples of online lives that have been disrupted because of research, including how such information traveled from one virtual world into a different, subsequent virtual space. To avoid such problems, I only identify by name those avatars whose information I found from online sources freely available on the Internet.

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[28] Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pierce, and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 6-8; Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 138-141.

Finally, when quoting inworld conversation, I have copied the conversations verbatim as they appeared at the moment in Second Life, including all misspellings. Residents use emoticons and various ways of expressing emotion that are vastly different from first life. These performances, however, are unique and powerful, and the misspellings can often reveal emotions present within the performance. Residents are more interested in communicating quickly than making sure all grammar and spelling is correct, but they rely on the quickness of the communication rather than the correctness of the typing.

Methodology

My study relies on ethnography, since this method gives a researcher the ability to deeply engage within a culture to see how its members interact and create meaning.[29] Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pierce, and T.L. Taylor believe that ethnography is well-suited to virtual worlds because it uncovers the "incredible range of ways to live a valid and meaningful human life,"[30] and since gender is a factor in how a virtual life proceeds, participant observation helps me see how Second Life residents feel gender should be performed. Second Life is just over ten years old, so the roots of these practices can still be identified and demonstrated through this research technique. Because I am studying a complicated system of performance within a virtual society, a triangulation of qualitative research methods, or the use of multiple methods to interpret the same phenomenon, is

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[29] Ibid., 8-9.

[30] Boellstorff, et. al, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 11-12.

necessary for a meaningful analysis.[31] To that end, I have used textual analysis and in-depth interviews alongside participant observation to investigate birth and marriage, two ritual performances in Second Life that regulate gender. As Ken Hillis notes in his study of online rituals, these performances "work to induce qualities of social coherence and order among participants," and in Second Life, these rituals grew up around the need for order surrounding the chaos of gender.[32]

This study took a number of twists and turns as I navigated through the virtual space. The original design of the work was to observe twenty births and marriages. I made contact with both maternity clinic owners as well as wedding chapel proprietors, and the observations began in earnest in the summer of 2012. I noticed a curiosity immediately: Both marriages and births had remarkably structured codes for performance. While marriages allowed for more variety in the individual performer's role within the ritual, birth was so tightly codified that each performance seemed almost a complete reperformance of every other birth I observed. After ten births that seemed similar down to the timing of the same lines, I made the decision to switch the focus of the study. I had made the assumption that I would see more emerging performance, as Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown describe virtual worlds as a place where

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[31] See Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003); D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).

[32] Ken Hillis, *Online a Lot of the Time: Ritual, Fetish, and Sign* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 48.

"cultures and meanings emerge from a complex set of interactions among the participants."[33] Instead of emerging culture and meaning, what I found were codified performances surrounding gender, yet I was not seeing the interactions that led to such regulations.

Christine Hine describes virtual ethnography as a process "which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself."[34] My assumption going into this virtual ethnographic study was that I would be able to see gender going through the interactions leading to its encoding, but since what I discovered was quite different, I had to follow the principle of adaptability, changing course to take into account the "demand [for] adaptation and the possibility of overturning prior assumptions."[35] To continue my investigation into the codification, I enrolled in one of Second Life's medical schools to learn the skills necessary to perform as an OB/Gyn in that world. Combined with the discussions of birth in the early forums and interviews with avatars who gave birth in the early beta days of the world, this experience helped to explain why birth performances are near mirror images of other birth performances.

My assumption at the start of the study was that birth and marriage were emerging activities, but the performances proved to already have gender deeply embedded in a sense of virtual habitus. Gender is operating seamlessly in Second Life. Rather than being

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[33] Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, "Why Virtual Worlds Can't Matter," *International Journal of Media and Learning* 1, no.1 (2009): 37.

[34] Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, 65.

[35] Ibid., 66.

the kind of virtual world where gender is free, open, and changeable as some researchers suggest, Second Life society had already come to stringent regulations surrounding the avatar body. At the beginning of the world, however, neither birth nor marriage existed as performances, and user anonymity led to genderless avatars and gender-switching across the virtual landscape. What I set out to discover was how Second Life society went from an unstructured, ragtag group of disparate users to a fully functioning culture. Fortunately, Second Life residents have been prolific bloggers and forum posters, so many of their thoughts and experiences are documented across the Internet. Using these historical artifacts, I will trace the evolution of gender norms.

CHAPTER 2

SECOND LIFE HABITUS

When each user enters Second Life, the environment doesn't seem natural or intuitive. A user has to push buttons that seem foreign, yet if the user remains committed to learning the interface, the process of pressing buttons and navigating the world eventually becomes second nature.[36] A Second Life user has to learn both the computer interface and its mechanics, but he also must learn to navigate the social aspect of the world, which operates under its own set of rules. Seasoned residents help those new to the world learn the rules of the world, and as they do so, they impart not only knowledge about the mechanics of the world but the societal beliefs and regulations that govern avatar behavior. Most importantly, society teaches new avatars what constitutes acceptable behavior within the virtual world. This chapter demonstrates Second Life habitus not only exists but remains distinctly different from first-life habitus. Every culture has a set of invisible expectations of taste, behavior, lifestyle, and dispositions, and Pierre

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[36] Ulf Wilhelmsson, "What is a Game Ego (Or How the Embodied Mind Plays a Role in Computer Game Environments)," in *Affective and Emotional Aspects of Human Computer Interaction,* ed. Maja Pivec (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2006), 49-50.

Bourdieu termed these unstated rules "habitus."[37] These rules generate economic, social, and cultural capital for each person within a society. As a society member conforms to habitus, he gains economic status, friends (social capital), and demonstrates knowledge of cultural norms (cultural capital). While following habitus leads to gains for each person, the invisible guidelines also bind society members to specific performances. Society naturalizes gender within these norms by promising capital gains if a member obeys the rules of behavior and performance.

In order to explain how the passing of habitus occurs as new users enter Second Life, I will use this chapter to analyze my own starting experience within the virtual world. This autoethnographic approach offers a number of advantages, since such writings "self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation."[38] Another distinct advantage is the way the analysis of my own experience links the acting individual to the social regulations at work, meaning autoethnography is a

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[37] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 134.

[38] Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, and Personal Reflexivity," in *Handbook of Qualitative Method*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 738.

means of describing the social interactions constraining performance.[39] Because I have

been a part of Second Life since 2009, I can also analyze my story from two perspectives,

from both first- and second-life societal viewpoints. Karl Heider, the originator of the

term autoethnography, insisted that "auto" should be a reference to the story coming from

someone who is part of the group being studied.[40] Because of my time in Second Life,

this autoethnographic account begins from the perspective of a user first entering the

world, but the analysis relies on my extended period within the world to reveal the virtual

habitus that other avatars taught to me via our interactions.

Each new user begins life in the virtual world in the same way, without a sense of

what's appropriate in the new world. These new people look in on the world from a

user's first-life perspective, meaning they bring first-life habitus into the virtual world.

When I logged into Second Life for the first time, I looked at the world as a casual

observer looking in from the outside, a tourist not truly invested in the world. When I

looked at the behavior around me, I couldn't understand what was happening because I

didn't know what rules the avatars were following. I was a noob.

Residents in Second Life refer to new avatars as noobs (also spelled newbs), and

they may be recognized by the use of starter avatars and their predilection for saying or

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[39] Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethngoraphy: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (New

York: Berg, 1997).

[40] Karl G. Heider, "What Do People Do?: Dani Auto-Ethnography," *Journal of

Anthropological Research* 31, no. 1 (1975): 3-17.

doing something outside of acceptable conduct.[41] This latter behavior is evidence of a lack of habitus, defined by Pierre Bourdieu as the collection of invisible, unspoken values, behaviors, and expectations parents and authority figures impart to children in their early years.[42] Habitus establishes classes and ranks of people in society and establishes proper behavior within each class sphere. Children of all classes, for example, will learn what is expected from their parents' example when it comes to what is considered good taste versus bad taste. A higher class mother might be walking down the street with her child and see children in a lower class neighborhood playing in the spray of a fire hydrant. The child expresses interest in playing in the water because it looks like fun, and the mother responds, "You don't want to play like those children. You have a nice sprinkler in the backyard." The mother is demonstrating that in this child's class playing in the street isn't in good taste, since children in their family's class need to play in the privacy of a backyard instead. This moment doesn't even have to be spoken aloud. The mother could turn her nose up at the children, for instance. The important part is that

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[41] Both users and residents can be considered noobs. When a user has never entered Second Life, the behavior of the resident is affected because the user isn't aware of how to behave. A resident, however, can also be considered a noob even if the user is experienced in Second Life. Because a resident's "birth date" is displayed in his profile, other residents consider newly-born residents noobies for a period of time. In addition, the customization of the avatar can be time-intensive, sometimes taking several days or weeks. The resident is considered a noob during this period.

[42] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 134.

the child learns what is considered correct behavior given the status she holds within her specific world.

Second Life doesn't have the same kind of habitus as first life, since the norms aren't taught from childhood, but there is a set of values, behaviors, taste levels, and expectations passed to new residents during their interactions with seasoned, older avatars. These behaviors differentiate groups within Second Life, such as furries (residents with animal avatars) and tinies (residents with teddy bear-like miniature avatars), but also establish a pattern of overall behavior for all users willing to commit to living in Second Life, a group also known as residents. Before a new user enters into residency status, however, she must interact with older residents until a level of habituation is attained. In doing so, the new user shows a commitment to living within the constraints of habitus, having been carefully taught by example and through negative consequences for inappropriate actions.

My own first experience shows the method by which older residents teach new avatars the boundaries for virtual performance. Anyone who isn't a gamer seems startled by Second Life. When I first loaded the necessary program to enter the world and started an avatar, I stared at the strange woman who appeared on my computer screen. She was wearing a pink polka-dotted dress, something that looked like what I had been forced to wear to Sunday school when I was little. It looked even stranger on this Barbie-doll-like woman with the tiniest waist and gravity-defying breasts. The ponytail was the only thing that looked anything like me. New users have a choice of several starter avatars, and I picked mine for her hair. I thought I wanted my avatar to look like me, but the only thing

that came close from the choices presented to me was this strange creature that looked like a cross between a pastor's wife in a bad dress from the 1980s and an oversexed robot.

I was okay with my avatar at first. I wasn't particularly sure I wanted to stay in this new world, so I didn't take a lot of care with her look, simply choosing the first starter avatar that appealed to me. Once I entered, however, other avatars on the welcome island began to point out either subtly or overtly that I would need to change my look. The avatars I came into contact with kept calling me "noob," and eventually, one of them mentioned something about my duck walk, the basic starter avatar's walking animation, before laughing at me and walking away. I realized from that exchange that changing my avatar's look was an important activity to accomplish before I would be allowed to interact with other residents without inviting their derision. In other words, I needed to find out how to change my duck walk.

The term avatar originally derives from Sanskrit, designating the incarnation of a deity on earth, but in virtual worlds, avatar refers to the "incredibly detailed digital body" that is constructed by the user for the character he embodies within the virtual world.[43] For Second Life society, making the commitment to crafting a unique digital body is a sign that a person has understood a basic level of taste. The pink polka-dotted dress that I thought was an okay choice for clothing looks poorly-made and ridiculous now that I understand the taste level of Second Life. The dress symbolizes the careless choice of a starter avatar, and since the outfit is free when you sign up, it also represents an avatar

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[43] Donald E. Jones, "I, Avatar: Constructions of Self and Place in Second Life and the Technological Imagination," *gnovis* 4, no. 1 (2006): 16.

that hasn't been across the Second Life landscape looking for the best producers of virtual

clothing. Now that I fully understand virtual habitus, I have come to realize that the dress

I arrived in seems like a pile of rags. Any resident talking to me in those early moments

would have been talking to the equivalent of a beggar on the street.[44]

Society steps in to enforce habitus. If an avatar's appearance doesn't indicate an

understanding of the taste level of the culture, that avatar won't assimilate into society

properly. I was laughed at when I tried to talk to people because of my noob status. One

of the easiest ways to draw Second Life society's attention to avatar appearance is to not

change anything. Noobs have a distinct look and walk that marks them. By eschewing

society's imperative to change the avatar's look, these users communicate a disregard for

habitus. One Second Life guidebook writer bemoans those who make this choice: "You

will see people walking around for months in these defaults. That's a dead giveaway that

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[44] Equating newbies with beggars combines the principles of cultural capital with

economic capital. Because newbies do not have the cultural items necessary to hold any

cultural capital, they must invest either time into creating such objects or economic

capital to obtain them. In initial interactions with older residents, newbies give the

impression of being beggars by asking for cultural items without understanding the

economic cost or by outright begging for older residents to hand over Linden dollars.

This gives newbies the reputation of being beggars, both through their begging for

cultural knowledge and the economic means to obtain appropriate objects. See

HighwayZombie Moose, "Newbie Baggers[sic]," *Second Life Forums Archive*, August 6,

2006, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/148/72/127583/1.html.

they are either insensitive with their appearance or careful with money. *Some…*are just

fine wearing the default look forever, or at least until they realize that this might be why

they're not getting dates."[45] The guidebook points out the fate of those ignoring habitus

surrounding avatar appearance. They face a virtual life with few friends and little chance

for intimate relationships. Noobies will be rejected in social interactions and social

capital denied to them until they begin to demonstrate an understanding of habitus and

capital. As citizens of a social world, residents must keep social capital, defined as the

number and quality of friends within a person's network,[46] foremost in their minds if they

wish to be functioning members of Second Life society. New residents have to acquire a

measure of virtual habitus before communication can begin and social capital be banked.

Second Life is a social world, and if new avatars wish to transition into becoming

residents, they quickly realize other avatars will ignore them if they don't have an

understanding of what constitutes good taste in clothing, body parts, and skin. Kinder

residents will sometimes help by suggesting places to get new items or by explaining

some of the values of Second Life. Most newcomers to Second Life learn the way I did,

through negative interactions with residents and watching to see the example set by those

same avatars.

Noobs discover the rules in more subtle ways as well, especially through the

exchange of cultural capital on the open societal market. Bourdieu defines cultural capital

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[45] Richard Mansfield, *How To Do Everything With Second Life* (New York: McGraw

Hill, 2008), 32. Emphasis in the original.

[46] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 184.

as the system of exchange that holds a person's cultural knowledge, which can then be used as a means of gaining status and power: "the structure of the distribution of instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and processed."[47] Cultural capital in Second Life exists in the digital objects residents create. A resident who crafts an object using skills approved by Second Life society gains the highest cultural capital, and other residents accrue cultural capital by acquiring these objects. This ability to understand what constitutes things marked as "good" versus "bad" is considered a part of taste, an element of habitus. Someone with a high level of taste, in a simplified example, would have a Picasso hanging on the wall, while someone of low taste might decide on a velvet painting of Elvis. Cultural capital rewards those with a high level of habitus expertise with the ability to climb in the cultural as well as social and economic marketplaces.

Cultural capital is controlled by habitus, which acts as an invisible set of expectations for how much an object or talent can be traded for within society. How a user crafts the avatar body demonstrates whether he has understood the rules of both habitus and cultural capital in Second Life. By choosing a skin that isn't hand-drawn, for example, a user is choosing what is considered a lower-quality skin, an indication that he hasn't understood the taste level of an established resident. Each avatar body is a series of digital points called a mesh, and a skin lies on top of the mesh to give the illusion of

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[47] Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, ed. Richard K. Brown (London: Tavistock, 1973), 73.

shadow, highlights, and features. Initial starter avatars have a poor quality skin. The eyebrows look like they were drawn with crayon, for example, instead of having shading and detail that gives the appearance of a brow that has definition. Similarly, the avatar mesh doesn't have all of the bumps and ridges of a biological body, such as the way a first-life body has protruding shoulder blades. A good quality skin uses shading to create the illusion of shoulder blades, while a poor quality skin would give the avatar the appearance of a back without any muscles or bone. By wearing the latter type of skin, noobs start off with the lowest level of cultural capital. Any older resident can see in an instant that the noob has not looked for a more defined, higher quality skin. These new users must navigate through the world and acquire habitus so that they can understand which items in Second Life stores carry cultural capital.

In the official Second Life guidebook, the chapter devoted to appearance begins with an admonition that seems to encourage new users to quickly learn what those with the best virtual taste deem appropriate:

> The importance of avatar appearance becomes obvious the moment you enter *Second Life:* the arrival lot on Orientation Island is often packed with freshly born avatars whose appearance is being edited by their owners. Every resident begins *Second Life* as an attractive young male or female in jeans and T-shirt, and almost every resident immediately begins working to make their avatar their own. This chapter discusses this process, explains the options available, and offers practical hints and notes. All this advice is only advice: feel free to choose your own path through *Second*

Life. But whatever you do, remember that your presence in the virtual

world—your virtual identity—is defined by your appearance.[48]

The designers of the Second Life Welcome Island made changing the avatar's appearance

one of the first activities new residents participate in when they arrive, the first signal to

new users that it is one of the early forms of cultural capital they must learn to acquire. In

many games, such as World of Warcraft, the starter avatar can have additional

accessories added, but the basic appearance doesn't change. Second Life differs from

these virtual environments, however, in the way it places emphasis on what users can

create inside the world using the tools built into the viewer. If a user wanted to import a

hand-drawn skin for her avatar, she would be able to do so for less than ten cents US. The

cultural capital from creating such a skin, however, has a much higher value on the

market. Such a skin demonstrates a commitment to Second Life, since it takes an

extended period of time to carefully draw all the features for a skin, while also

demonstrating a high degree of artistic skill, a valued commodity in virtual cultural

capital.

My basic starter avatar simply wasn't enough. As the new resident begins to

subtly acquire virtual habitus, her appearance will change in order to gain respect and

possible admiration of other residents, the social capital missing from a noobie's life. The

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[48] Michael Rymaszewski et al., *Second Life: The Official Guide* (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley,

2007), 82. It should be noted that new users find more choices for initial avatar

appearance in today's Second Life, but even with the more than fifty starter avatar

choices, these bodies are instantly recognizable as noobs.

guidebook still emphasizes the user's choice when creating an avatar, but it also suggests that not heeding the advice and hints in the guide could result in a definition of self that doesn't match what the user desires. I would argue that definition is really about gaining the respect of the user's new virtual community by shifting the spectator position into the virtual world. Rather than looking at the world through the user's eyes, the guidebooks suggest looking at Second Life through the eyes of a resident spectator, looking at the exchanges of cultural capital through the filter of a virtual habitus different from what might be expected in first life.

Other guidebooks similarly place an emphasis on the need to make a good first impression on other Second Life residents. Brian White tells new users that "how you look conveys the first signs of what you are all about to those you interact with. Will it be love at first sight, or should you duck and run?"[49] Avatars who exhibit bodies that use high-quality items also demonstrate knowledge of habitus and cultural capital. In other words, they will be seen as appropriate romantic partners because they can spend the cultural capital they have banked to acquire social capital, while those who haven't understood the cultural parameters of the performance will find themselves without companionship. Such a suggestion illustrates the intersection of cultural and social capital. By accruing the necessary taste and skill level in Second Life, a resident can exchange cultural capital for social interactions, gathering friends within the virtual world

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[49] Brian A. White, *Second Life: A Guide to Your Virtual World* (Indianapolis, IN: Que, 2008), 68.

that, in turn, increases her social capital. Such exchange is only possible after the boundaries of habitus are understood.

Habitus is passed on to noobs through the example of other avatars. In another guidebook, Sean Percival recommends avatar-watching at a popular shopping area to get an idea of how avatars "should" look: "Most [residents] have gone to great lengths to customize their avatar so it's also a great place to get some inspiration for your own look."[50] Note that Percival writes from a resident's spectator position. Rather than suggesting that users fashion their avatars, he describes residents of the world making those decisions. While a subtle shift from the user's viewpoint, that perspective makes it clear that Percival wants his readers to understand the virtual cultural norms, a direct teaching of habitus for the Second Life resident. Each of these pieces of advice points to another method for teaching virtual habitus: mocking new residents for their appearance until they either leave the world or figure out the rules by imitating others. The observation and mimicking of others as the means to develop habitus in these new residents parallels the way Bourdieu describes children being socialized in first life society through imitation of adults who are already marked by habitus.[51] Mocking is also important because it points to the social consequences of not obeying the rules. You can ignore habitus and how it operates, but in doing so, you will never accrue the social and cultural capital necessary to carve out a second life.

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[50] Sean Percival, *Second Life: In-World Travel Guide* (Indianapolis, IN: Que, 2008), 56.

[51] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 134.

For new users who decide to commit to understanding the virtual habitus, the first step is to learn what constitutes "good" content that will gain them the capital they seek. Second Life is full of digital content given the approval of society, such as skins, shapes, clothing, buildings, furniture, and accessories. There are no defined rules that govern what residents must choose, yet residents feel compelled to choose certain items by the taste level that habitus establishes.

Second Life cultural capital grew from early residents determining what would be considered the best the virtual world had to offer. Cultural capital is a commodity that does not remain static but constantly shifts as society interacts with cultural objects, and Bourdieu's more nuanced definition of cultural capital shows how residents determined which items would be allowed on the cultural marketplace. The first type of cultural capital, embodied capital, represents deeply embedded beliefs and behaviors passed on through the culture, usually during childhood in first life.[52] Each avatar runs into this type of capital as he is learning how to manipulate the program, such as my realization that I needed to go beyond the starter avatar. Just like a child, noobies learn deeply embedded beliefs about cultural capital and the behaviors that rule Second Life. One Second Life belief passed on during this phase is the virtual tendency to ignore the user behind the screen and not inquire about first-life details of other avatars. Jonathan Matusitz calls this type of cultural omission a kind of learned deception that has to be actively practiced:

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[52] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258.

"Masks and non-disclosures of identity are part of the grammar of cyberspace."[53] This grammar is discovered only as the avatar interacts in society and realizes asking for first-life information is unacceptable. If a new avatar steps into a dance club, says hello, then asks where everyone is from (implying first life), he will generally receive the cold shoulder in open chat and a few private messages telling him that first life stays in first life. Even revealing first-life information you may know about other avatars is forbidden. The official Second Life guide reinforces a principle that is also a part of the Linden Lab community standards: "Information about another resident can be freely shared only if it is displayed in the resident's profile, or if you have the affected resident's consent."[54] Anna Peachey and Mark Childs believe Second Life anonymity is an example of a virtual community setting strict boundaries of behavior, a parallel to the kind of cultural norms long established in first life.[55] Other types of Second Life embodied capital can be seen in methods of building, when and when not to fly, and dance etiquette. These proper behaviors and skills are introduced both in the welcome area and in avatar interactions.[56]

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[53] Jonathan Matusitz, "Deception in the Virtual World: A Semiotic Analysis of Identity," *Journal of New Media and Culture* 3, no.1 (2005):

http://www.ibiblio.org/nmediac/winter2004/

matusitz.html.

[54] Rymazewski et al., *Second Life: The Official Guide,* 15.

[55] Anna Peachey and Mark Childs, *Reinventing Ourselves: Contemporary Concepts of Identity in Virtual Worlds* (New York: Springer, 2011), 193-197.

[56] Wagner James Au, *The Making of Second Life* (New York: Harper, 2009), 60-2.

Each of these skills is carefully taught through example and interaction. New residents

learn by watching more seasoned residents perform behaviors, such as flying and

dancing, while also subtly asking questions and gaining information. As they learn the

skills and behaviors of embodied cultural capital, residents also develop the taste level for

their virtual habitus. If a behavior or object doesn't meet the requirements of embodied

cultural capital, residents would consider it in bad taste to display in public.

The second type of cultural capital, objectified capital, manifests as physical

objects that hold particular meaning and, as a result, some form of economic or social

capital.[57] A new user doesn't have to explore very far in Second Life before realizing

what is considered beautiful and worth Linden dollars.[58] These objects, as Bonnie Nardi

would suggest, are given "safe haven" by the rules of virtual society.[59] Residents

replicate "good" objects and use them often so that the excellent quality is continually

reproduced and preserved. Peachey and Childs point to avatar fashion as a linchpin of

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[57] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 241-258.

[58] Second Life has its own economy, and the currency is known as the Linden. Because

the same term applies to employees of Linden Lab, in this dissertation, I will use Linden

dollars as the term used to describe this currency. Users must purchase Linden dollars

through the Linden Lab website, but they can also exchange Linden dollars back into the

first-life currency of their choice. See Sarah Robbins and Mark Bell, *Second Life for

Dummies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008), 160.

[59] Bonnie Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of

Warcraft* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 79.

virtual society, an example of the kind of objects replicated in order to establish quality and societal taste level.[60] Both Au and Malaby give fashion a primary place in their histories, with each dedicating a portion of his book to discussing a specific fashion company: Pixel Dolls and Adam & Eve, respectively.[61] Wagner James Au used Pixel Dolls to describe the ways avatars could transform their first life selves into something new, describing the clothing as "elegant" and "Gothic-inflected."[62] Thomas Malaby's description of Adam & Eve clothing starts when he asks a Linden Lab employee where he could find good clothing. Pointed to Adam & Eve, one of the first superstores for avatar appearance in Second Life, he describes the clothing as "stylish."[63] In both cases, fashion and specific fashion outlets are described in positive terms. Clothes that are considered the most elegant, beautiful, skillfully made, or appropriate are given objectified capital in the way that residents use the objects within the world, a bar that all other clothing makers are asked to match or exceed. Both Au and Malaby entered the world devoid of such knowledge, but by asking for fashion advice and watching for the best clothes on other avatars, these two researchers attained an understanding of which items held cultural capital in the world. At the same time, they learned part of virtual habitus by incorporating what constitutes good taste into their virtual lives.

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[60] Peachey and Childs, *Reinventing Ourselves*, 6.

[61] Au, *Making of Second Life,* 71-84; Thomas Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 17-8.

[62] Au, *Making of Second Life,* 71.

[63] Malaby, *Making Virtual Worlds,* 17-18.

By the time Rebecca Tapley was writing her Second Life guidebook in 2008, objectified capital with regard to fashion was firmly established. In her section on buying clothes, she says readers will "learn how to shop for the clothes and accessories that suit your personality, without falling prey to common 'newbie' mistakes or buying poor quality."[64] The reference to mistakes and poor quality indicates the community had determined standards for the appearance of such creations. Rather than putting a stamp of approval on specific stores, Second Life passed information about objectified capital by labeling goods with who might wear them (newbies, or noobs) and suggesting only those with little understanding of what is quality in Second Life would consider buying such items. This type of capital isn't about just the economic rewards of selling digital items, but also the taste level required to understand what will get a resident noticed in society.

The final type of capital, institutional, consists of cultural capital given via official groups to those objects, people, or organizations deemed worthy of receiving official qualifications and recognition. From the beginning of this virtual world, Linden Lab would list certain events and stores on the Second Life website, especially those that promised to bring large numbers of avatars together to congregate. Having a Linden arrive at a function or wear a certain brand of clothing meant that the dance or store was given a high place in the Second Life community because it had the official seal of approval. This perceived blessing from Linden Lab gave those dance areas and stores a way of drawing more people and traffic. Even today, the Second Life website houses a

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[64] Rebecca Tapley, *Designing Your Second Life: Techniques and Inspiration for you to Design Your Ideal Parallel Universe* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2008), 43.

Destination Guide, a list of inworld areas featuring what the company believes are the most creative or artistic sims inworld or ones that offer the best shopping experience.[65] A Linden Lab nod adds value to any existing cultural capital, making it a higher stakes commodity in the Second Life market.

The Second Life guidebooks, written between 2007 and 2009, give the impression that habitus and cultural and social capital had existed for a long time, but in truth, these norms developed in the early years of the world, making them less than five years old. An easy way of tracing cultural capital through this period exists in the barren wastelands known as the freebie islands. These open spaces filled with randomly scattered boxes may look like a warehouse was dumped out onto open ground, but these marketplaces serve as training grounds for new residents in the ways of cultural capital.

Freebies: Objects Moving Through Cultural Capital Designations

In order to map how cultural capital developed in the early years of Second Life, I first need to explain how objects came to have value within the space through a combination of Linden Lab intervention and resident behavior. Early pioneers entered a world very different from the one that exists today. Everything was done publicly. Today's residents can buy private islands to live on away from the general population, but at the beginning of Second Life, there were only ten public areas where residents could be. These sims, short for simulators, are so called because each of these areas of land is run on a single server that allows for the simulation. In today's Second Life, these sims

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[65] "Destination Guide," *Second Life* website,

https://secondlife.com/destinations?lang=en-US, accessed May 30, 2013.

can be private areas available only to avatars with permission to enter, but the earliest residents mingled together openly in the new world.

Early residents favored building as a communal activity. Linden Lab didn't allow building in every area. Instead, residents gathered in sandboxes, designated wide-open areas of land where they could build whatever they desired. Part of the purpose of these early beta testing days was to test the limits of the new program, so residents were encouraged to try all of the building features for crafting objects. The program in these early days only had the capability to create items using prims, short for primitives. These objects still remain the basis for all objects in the virtual world. Taking one of thirteen geometric shapes, each prim can be stretched and reshaped to make various kinds of objects, from chairs to fabric. Prims cause server slowdown, so early residents were taxed based on how many prims they had left visible on the land. Items can also be taken back into a resident's inventory. An inventory is a list of items that an avatar owns but that aren't currently visible in the world, somewhat like a closet. When an item is placed into a user's inventory, she can still drag it with a mouse from the side of the screen onto the ground, making it visible again. Linden Lab started the economy of the world by insisting that every prim that was visible at a certain time of the week would be taxed, and clever residents quickly worked around that system by simply taking everything into their inventories before tax time rolled around. The rest of the time, prims were scattered everywhere in the sandbox areas as residents made items and shared them freely with others. Everyone left their completed objects out, arranged in such a way that other residents could stroll through their work and admire what they had created. These messy jumbles of objects became like museums or a galleries. Residents would stroll around and

chat with others about the different objects, commenting and offering advice about what they liked and didn't liked.

As residents decided which of these items they considered the best, certain builders accrued more cultural capital than others. *Robin Soujourner* and *Abramelin Wolfe*, for example, are still considered two of the top creators in Second Life, and both refer to the days when they would give away their creations in the sandboxes, learning how to build and what people liked as the new society formed.[66] The initial exchange of items was often playful, and Linden dollars were rarely exchanged during these encounters. These early transactions were not about economic gain, but the bragging rights to say that other residents liked your object and wanted a copy of their own. These objects then gained objectified cultural capital, and as residents collected these items, they gained the embodied cultural capital of understanding what was considered good and bad taste. Virtual habitus grew through these interactions establishing taste, and the interactions themselves began to set the precedent for the behaviors that would be acceptable in the world. The best creators used the cultural capital to gradually turn the free items into a brand commanding economic capital. *Robin,* for example, quickly became known for making the best clothes, and her system for clothing texture creation

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[66] "The Drax Files: World Makers [Episode 6: Abramelin Wolfe]," YouTube video, 4:59, posted by Draxtor Despres, May 17, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nSJpzzN4Ug; "The Drax Files: World Makers [Episode 10: Robin Soujourner]," YouTube video, 5:00, posted by Draxtor Despres, August 30, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZOF2hiWYUo.

remains the standard. As the economy started to evolve, creators such as *Robin* and *Abramelin* could command higher prices because of the high cultural capital held by their brands.

The concept of free items never left the economy of Second Life even after the sandboxes became less important to society, but freebies did morph into a different kind of exercise in habitus and cultural capital. Residents must now rent land from Linden Lab, and they can subsequently build whatever they want on their plots of land. For residents who do not own land, crowded sandboxes still exist. Walls of boxes generally line the outer edges of these areas, full of free items from the early days of the world as well as more recent items that might be considered "last season." When I first landed in Second Life, a kind avatar named *Manon Chiantelle* gave me an inventory folder titled "Useful SL Landmarks for U" with several freebie areas listed. She took me to one, and she showed me which items would be considered the good freebies versus the junk that would just clutter up my inventory. She encouraged me to ignore t-shirts, for example, given the myriad t-shirts displayed and the ease with which they can be made. "You can even make them yourself," she insisted, suggesting that even in my noobie state such a feat was possible. She instead guided me to the designer items, like gowns and jeans, which would get me started in the world. What *Manon* was actually teaching me was how to be approachable by wearing clothes that showed I understood what good taste looked like for an avatar. My guide was showing me by example what taste level is expected for someone in a certain group, and at the same time, she demonstrated a kindness and openness that is highly valued in Second Life society. I met *Manon* in one of the upscale jazz clubs on my second night in Second Life, and I was still wearing my original noobie

clothes. What I learned from her willingness to help me was not only what the taste level and behavior should be for that upscale jazz club but that I really couldn't be a part of the group until I made the decision to understand their culture. Different groups would go through the same process differently. A new resident interested in fantasy roleplaying might find a guide who would point out the best fairy costumes in the freebie area. The overall quality of the items would be similar in each case, since the quality of the textures and the building, the underlying objectified capital, would be the same.

The freebie areas contain many items that are considered worthless junk, but these areas provided a space where residents could develop the standards for embodied and objectified capital evident. Society demonstrates that capital today in what is deemed worthy to sell in a Second Life store. Despite being able to display every item ever created in a single store, creators selectively display only those items holding the most cultural capital. In a store, a single prim can display all of a store's items, no matter how many the creator has to offer. These displays cycle through pictures of all of a creator's items, and a shopper can purchase any of the items on display simply by touching the display. There is no economic cost to store owners to keep all of their goods on display at all times. Second Life has the capability to be, therefore, like a continuously stocked department store that keeps all of the items from previous years and yet continues to build new stock at the same time. Cultural capital has dictated that some of these items are not worth selling because they do not meet the standards for objectified capital, and because of embodied capital and the taste level it generates, people simply won't buy the older stock and may cast aspersions on the new items because of the poor quality of the other goods. In general, stores in Second Life only display the items considered the very

best. When I was a noobie, I would only see the best goods for sale in stores, so I didn't have the opportunity to discern for myself if what came before was more creative or interesting. Society had already determined cultural capital, so all I had to do was learn and be able to replicate the taste level at that particular moment.

Once a creator reaches a level of proficiency, other builders may decide to take their own similar goods off the market. *Abramelin Wolfe* is known for his animations, and for three years, no one else in Second Life attempted to make an animation overrider. This item is essential to make an avatar move more naturally than the standard animations allow. An animation overrider is a single object that changes an avatar's walk and the way he stands, sits, and flies. *Abramelin* was the first to use motion capture technology to create animations and a standard overrider. Motion capture transfers the movements of a first-life actor into digital coding, meaning that animations with motion capture have a greater connection to a biological body. *Abramelin*'s animations were smoother than anything on the Second Life market at the time, and his work quickly surpassed every other animator's work. These other animators then worked on types of animations that didn't have to do with basic movements like walking or sitting, since they could still sell animations such as sex or dance animations. It wasn't until other animators found access to motion capture technology that other animation overriders came onto the market. What's important about *Abramelin*'s story is that other animators simply walked away from potential business because of the high cultural capital in *Abramelin*'s work. Cultural capital can muscle out other ideas and make it difficult to change an established pattern.

Cultural capital and the creation of habitus can seem like rule-making, but the rules aren't written down and more often than not remain invisible to those obeying the rules. Habitus is very different from written rules established by Linden Lab or by residents themselves. Rather than being overtly posted and enforced, habitus is more subtly transmitted. The following examination of the rocket wars demonstrates the difference between habitus and overt rules.

The Rocket Wars: Habitus versus Rule-making

The 2003 rocket wars remain one of the stranger examples of how Second Life society and its cultural capital developed. At this point in its history, users had to request to be invited into the world with the understanding that they would be testing for bugs and glitches in the system, so residents of this time period would engage in activities that tested the limits of the program and, often, society as well. It was these confrontations that established cultural capital and habitus. Oftentimes, these interactions also included elements of overt rule-making, and the rocket wars were no exception.

The rocket wars started innocently enough. The physics engine for Second Life wasn't available across the grid. This mechanism allows for objects to simulate gravity, weather, and collisions, such as when two avatars crash together with the result of falling to the ground. Such a system requires a great deal of processing power, and without the infrastructure in place at Linden Lab, the company didn't wish to make it available widely until it had been thoroughly tested. In the early days of 2003, many residents became frustrated by the antics on the Olive sim, one of the areas where physics was enabled. The physics engine allows objects to bounce and move through the world as well as triggering other actions based on what the object interacts with. A ball, for example, might bounce

on the ground and make a sound every time it collides with the virtual ground. Early

builders thought bouncing balls were fun, and they tweaked scripts to make them bounce

higher, faster, and louder.

If one bouncing ball was fun to watch, how much fun would multiple bouncing

balls be? This question seemed to guide the early builders, and by the early days of 2003,

less than four months after the beta test of Second Life started, these bouncing balls

became a massive issue within the virtual world with the addition of another object:

rockets. A script was developed in late 2002 that allowed a single prim to expel particles,

tiny objects that would materialize from the original prim, and the particles of choice

became the bouncing balls. Imagine a machine gun that fired hundreds of bouncing balls

that littered the landscape and made annoying boingy noises as they scattered. Not only

were the appearance and sound distracting, the amount of server processing power

required to make these objects move through the world crashed the sims or slowed the

world to a crawl.

Two groups in Second Life began complaining about these rockets in February

2003. *Wednesday Grimm*, the mayor of a small town called Lindenburg, officially banned

all rockets from his area after a town meeting where the eighteen residents of the town, a

large number for the beta era, complained about the lag and tacky look of the town

caused by the rockets and their debris.[67] A few days later, *Charlie Omega*, one of the

earliest and most vocal residents, apologized on the forums for sending a mass instant

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[67] Wednesday Grimm, "(OT) Town Meeting Minutes," *Second Life Forum Archive*,

http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/5c/930/1.html, February 9, 2003.

message to everyone logged in to SL that night. After being repeatedly pelted with rocket balls on Olive, a sim known for being a place for builders, he exclaimed, "I can't see the point in repeadedly launching these rockets. This is beta YES. The rockets are well known to CRASH sims. Even the Lindens know this all to well now. So knock it off!"[68] The battle continued for months on Olive. In the eyes of the residents complaining on the forums, the Lindens seemed uninterested or unwilling to stop the testing of the rockets. When *Christopher Nomad* posted a message to complain about the rockets yet again in September of 2003, the use of rockets to pester other residents had reached an extreme.[69] *Nomad* tells the tale of having to move around the Olive sim multiple times to attempt to avoid the constant barrage of bouncing balls from specific residents trying to annoy other residents as a form of amusement. He even went so far as to build a box he could build inside to avoid the constant barrage of abuse, which didn't protect him from the rockets.

> I pop out my box and go to work, in comes Tamahome Kobyashi [another avatar], its not enough that the box is there, oh no, he has to get INSIDE the box! Upon being asked to leave he decides it would be really funny to fill the box with Super Physics Balls 10 meters in diameter and knock me out of olive. Upon my return to olive he shoots me with some gun.

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[68] Charlie Omega, "Mass Global IM from me Latenight.," *Second Life Forum Archive*, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/41/1061/1.html, February 20, 2003.

[69] Christopher Nomad, "A public apology to Charlie Omega," *Second Life Forum Archive,* http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/7b/5343/1.html, September 19, 2003.

FINE!

Reported.

Now its at this point that I gather that he is told that he cant do things like that.

So... lets get a TON of these other moronic asshole friends of his and come stand on top of my little box and shoot the roof with guns and laugh and laugh and laugh... oh what fun!

REPORTED.

I gather he was told he couldnt do that either.

However, he would be allowed to come into my little private area and build away! As long as he isnt interfereing with me.

What is the point of building an area for yourself to have some privacy if no one will respect it?[70]

From a cultural standpoint, this rocket battle reveals something important about the values emerging in this society. Specifically, creativity is valued over freedom. Linden Lab advertises Second Life as a place where users are confined only by their imaginations, but in fact, they are also bound by the invisible parameters of performance within that society. The early residents made it clear in the discussion following that the crime was not the development of the rocket but the disruption of another person's creativity. *Bob Bunderfield*, still widely recognized today as an excellent builder, weighed in on the argument:

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[70] Ibid.

Olive IS supposed to be a place where people would experiment and get things "right" before bringing them into a populated SIM. IT'S NOT A PLAYGROUND as some have turned it into.

I find it extremely annoying myself when certain people in Olive choose to make items, and allow them to escape from the confines of the Pit, and then do nothing to track them down. You are ALL supposed to be Adults! Clean up your messes will you![71]

The early Second Life field of potentials was shaped by interactions such as the one over rocket use. The possibility to use rockets to annoy others or litter the landscape was rejected, though rockets weren't banned by society entirely. Fireworks, which used exactly the same programming as the bouncing ball rockets, continue to be very popular in the virtual world today. This type of rocket wasn't always used properly. Exploiting a bug in the program, some users changed how rockets could be played with. Only two months after the beta testing started, James Linden had to warn the community that attaching fireworks to an avatar's body could result in permanently breaking an account.[72] No overt rules were made by Linden Lab about attaching fireworks, but the impression that these items were dangerous pervaded the Second Life community. Avatars can attach

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[71] Bob Bunderfield, "A public apology to Charlie Omega," *Second Life Forum Archive,* http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/7b/5343/1.html, September 19, 2003.

[72] James Linden, "Don't attach fireworks to yourself – breaks your account," *Second Life Forum Archive*, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/111/ef/115/1.html, December 3, 2002.

prims to their bodies, which is necessary for certain types of clothing, such as pant legs or

sleeves. Other people use attachments to fashion the shape of an animal out of the avatar

body, like attaching an elephant head that replaces an avatar's own head. In this case, an

adventurous resident attached several fireworks to his body, wondering what would

happen. His life blew apart, and he had to create a new avatar because his old life had

dissolved into pixels.[73]

This virtual equivalent of blowing off a limb with a firework kept virtual

fireworks displays in the domain of expert scripters and builders who built rockets that

could be activated from a distance without damage. Linden Lab quickly coded a scripting

fix for the avatar body so no one could destroy her second life. By the time it was fixed,

habitus had absorbed the belief that fireworks are something only experienced creators

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[73] The reasons behind the death of this avatar relate to a complex series of computer

issues relating to how the avatar appears on the screen. Fireworks use scripts that call for

specific types of interactions with the image of the object on the screen. Since a firework

lights, then burns out, a script must include a die function that kills of the image of the

burning ember. When that script was attached to an avatar in the early days, this same

script would make the avatar image "burn out" just as the firework would appear to be

dying out. When the image of the avatar disappeared, the event triggered Second Life

interface code to disable the functionality of the user's interface until the script stopped.

Unfortunately, the interactions between the firework script and the Second Life interface

code continued to interact on a never-ending loop, effectively shutting down an avatar's

existence. See Ibid.

can put together because of the danger involved. These scripts did cause many of the same headaches as the bouncing ball rockets. The scripts and prims created a large amount of lag on sims where they would run, requiring those in attendance to unattach scripted items, such as hair, shoes, and walking animation overriders to allow computers the necessary server space to process the firework information.[74] Despite these inconveniences, residents willingly gave up appearance items for the privilege of watching a performance of high cultural capital. A message from Frank Linden in January of 2003 described fireworks as one of the good uses of particle scripts, rocket technology, and uploaded sounds.[75] Residents gave fireworks cultural capital in the way these objects are considered difficult to create and manage, and Linden Lab bestowed institutional capital on firework creators by giving them the official seal of approval. In the process, habitus surrounded this item of cultural capital, making it acceptable for people to enjoy a fireworks display while avoiding rockets. Habitus dictates that residents can like fireworks, but they should avoid rocket use and the acceptance of such performances.

Many activities and objects evolved in a manner similar to the rocket in the early days of Second Life, a time Wagner James Au describes as when "identity and reality itself were fluid and random and changing at a whim, based on what the individual or the

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[74] Laukosargas Svarog, "Live and Let Live," Second Life Forum Archives, September 28, 2004, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/18/49/23635/1.html.

[75] Nexus Nash, "Everybody Read This! From Frank Linden," *Second Life Forum Archive*, January 14, 2003, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/5f/449/1.html.

group decided at any given moment."[76] Second Life society started by playing with the many possibilities of the new world, but as these performances were viewed by other residents, the boundaries of those performances became established.

Alt creation is an example of a behavior that has specific performance parameters that grew from these early days. Alt is short for alternate avatar, and a single user can have unlimited alts active in the world. These extra avatars are a curious part of Second Life. Each user begins with a primary avatar, but Linden Lab allows for multiple accounts at any one time. Today's residents use these alternate accounts for several functions: a banking alt to hold funds for an online business, a creative alt that would allow a user to build or script without interference from private messages from friends, testing alts that give clothing creators a chance to experiment with products before putting them on the market, and even an "escape" alt to wander the Second Life landscape with anonymity. The most common alt is the social alt, an avatar designed to highlight a different aspect of the user's identity and who lives a separate life from the primary resident.[77] These alts, however, are bound by certain performance parameters. In one recent inworld drama, *Katerina Devinna* demonstrated a transgression of alt performance parameters. *Bleshemique Wulluf* married *Art Freck* in a lavish ceremony. Three days later, *Bleshemique* was contacted by a resident named *Tevy Baraheri* who claimed to be having an affair with *Artman*. *Tevy* had been the stripper at *Artman*'s bachelor party ahead of the ceremony, but she also declared that she had been dating him

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[76] Au, *Making of Second Life,* 36.

[77] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life,* 128-33.

for many weeks before that day. Heartbroken, *Bleshemique* confronted her virtual husband, and in the commotion following this announcement, she turned to her good friend, *Katerina*, to bemoan the end of her relationship. *Katerina* had a great virtual life herself, having only days before become engaged to *Hawk Eyre.* After several days of mourning her relationship, *Bleshemique* noticed things she said to *Katerina* were making their way into ridiculing messages she received from *Tevy*. After a public confrontation at a dance, *Katerina*'s user admitted to being behind not only *Tevy* but a grand total of thirty-one avatars. After the announcement, *Katerina* lost her business, was banned from multiple social venues across the grid, and her own relationship with *Hawk* ended. She had been known as a prolific and talented creator, but many avatars publicly announced they were deleting all of *Katerina*'s creations from their inventories. Society shut her out, yet it did so for behavior (alt-making) that is deemed acceptable when such behavior is constrained by habitus. Eventually, *Katerina* was reaccepted into society when she listed her business alts in her profile and shut down all other alt accounts. There are no written rules about alts, but society pressures avatars into having alts only for business and creative uses or social alts who stay far away from the relationships of the primary avatar. Alt behavior is dictated by habitus, and anyone stepping outside of habitus loses social and cultural capital as a result.

Gradually, residents determined which behaviors, building exercises, and types of identity play would be acceptable for its residents. Cultural capital was given to builds that didn't impinge on the freedom of other users while still demonstrating the embodied capital of being able to manipulate the program as well as the objective capital of building objects that could draw the admiration, traffic, and Linden dollars of other users.

The early days of the Second Life program didn't allow for the same kind of objects as the later versions would, such as sculpts, advanced scripts, and mesh, but the principles of what objects were allowed and endorsed were formed in these early days of the beta world.

Society felt the need to regulate identity play in the same way as objects such as rockets. A child avatar is one type of identity much discussed in the pioneering days of Second Life. Society uses both overt, written rules and the invisible rules making up habitus to dictate performance, and child avatars eventually came to be regulated by both types of regulatory mechanisms. Some residents played with the avatar configuration menu to change their avatar shapes to the lowest height possible. With the addition of children's clothing, these residents began calling themselves child or kiddie avatars. *Steller Sunshine*, the world's very first resident aside from the Lindens, started the first group for "big kids that just refuse to grow up. =0)" in early 2003.[78] Residents using child avatars were initially considered roleplayers, a specific designation in virtual society, but they were actually exploring an identity based in a child-like world.

Society's first step toward defining this identity began with the roleplaying designation. Groups of residents would set up specific areas with the characteristics of an environment, like a Wild West town, and residents occupying that space would clothe themselves and behave in roles suited to that specific environment (such as a saloon keeper or gunslinger). Roleplay was usually confined to a single sim or a limited

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[78] Stellar Sunshine, "Introducing 'Our Gang'," *Second Life Forum Archives*, February 5, 2003, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/2d/838/1.html.

collection of sims. Roleplayers are free to go to other areas of the virtual space, but while in general areas of Second Life, their performance is confined to generally acceptable behavior. Gunslinging, for example, is discouraged in general areas. Either the sim owner sets up a system so that people arriving to the sim receive a set of explicit rules or the residents pressure the roleplayer to stop the behavior. If a roleplayer arrived with a gun in a holster, other residents would private message the roleplayer and ask him to remove his weapons if he wished to remain on the sim. If he refused, the owner of the land could click a button and transport that roleplayer away from the sim, the virtual equivalent of kicking him out. Though there is no way of killing an avatar, guns symbolize the roleplay, and regular avatars either ban other avatars with guns outright or ask offenders to remove the weapons.

Child avatars created an interesting roleplaying group. While the initial intent was innocent, these residents began exploring a new potential with these avatars. Ageplay involves child avatars going into the adult-rated sexual areas of Second Life and participating in avatar sexual situations while maintaining the childhood roleplay. When the practice was uncovered by the first-world media in 2007, one of the examples was of a child avatar who claimed to be a ten-year-old girl offering blowjobs to any adult male avatar in her vicinity.[79] Even before the media storm that engulfed the practice, residents struggled with whether to allow ageplay as an acceptable practice.

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[79] William Dobson, "Second Life 'Wonderland' scandal hits mainstream media," *Massively* (blog), posted October 31, 2007,

The earliest reference to child avatars and sexual play in the Second Life forums

occurs in early 2006, but the behavior was debated as a possible identity and not

immediately identified as deviant behavior. Ageplay was first considered a protected

form of play within the world, and those residents speaking against it found themselves

facing a backlash of virtual opinion based on an earlier component of habitus: the belief

in each resident's freedom to create. A Linden openly admonished *bella Ophelia*, the first

avatar to post about ageplay in the forums, for violating Second Life's community

standard for personal disputes, suggesting that even asking if ageplay is appropriate and

confronting those who practice the activity is an example of intolerance.[80] Ageplay forum

posts show, however, that the issue became buzzed about by the end of 2006, with most

residents expressing significant "negative emotional responses" over the practice.[81] Other

residents tried to fight that burgeoning habitus by repeating that child avatars are

consenting adults pretending to be children in the sexual situations. One such resident,

Taco Rubio, an active ageplay proponent, started an entire gallery of ageplay pictures in a

little-used area of the forums because he thought that forum area could be "one of the few

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http://massively.joystiq.com/2007/10/31/second-life-wonderland-scandal-hits-

mainstream-media/.

[80] Torley Linden, "Paedophilia Groups Tolerated in SL?," *Second Life Forum Archives*,

March 25, 2006, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/08/96080/1.html.

[81] Andrew A. Adams, "Virtual Sex with Child Avatars," in *Emerging Ethical Issues of

Life in Virtual Worlds*, eds. Charles Wankel and Shaun K. Malleck (Charlotte, NC:

Information Age Publishing, 2010), 55-72.

places where we didn't have to deal with constnat negitivity... let's keep it that way…!"[82] Despite his pushback against habitus, *Taco* and others in the ageplay community felt the constant pressure from the larger Second Life society, the result of habitus placing ageplay at a lower level of taste and class than other activities. Linden Lab did not step in to ban ageplay at this moment in Second Life history, so no written rules existed against the practice. After seeing performances of age play, society rejected the performance, deemed it inappropriate, and reacted to ageplay residents by avoiding them and reacting negatively to discussions of ageplay in the forums. Older residents passed on this disregard for child avatars to newer residents as they arrived, assigning deviant status to child avatars through the transmission of habitus.

Residents developed embodied capital regarding these avatars, turning them into sexual misfits they were wont to call "creepy" and "disturbingly realistic."[83] This embodied capital led to habitus, and child avatars have been marginalized inworld since. Society's general mistrust of child avatars manifests itself in the way child avatars are

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[82] Taco Rubio, "Age Play Parade!," *Second Life Forum Archives*, August 7, 2006, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/53/5f/127915/1.html.

[83] See for example Jesse Linden, "Allow Avatar's to be shorter," *Second Life Forum Archives*, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/13/16/44505/1.html; AvaRose Zerbino, "Child avi's – Good or bad?," *Second Life Forum Archives*, June 15, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/ce/265117/1.html; Dakota Tebaldi, "New controversial kid-avs-in-Zindra thread!," *Second Life Forum Archives,* September 19, 2009, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/a3/340827/1.html.

treated in private sims off of the Second Life mainland. Linden Lab controls the

collection of sims known as the mainland, and all activity in this area is to be generally

acceptable to the community, meaning no sexual activity or adult behavior. Child avatars

cannot be banned from this area unless stepping outside the written rules for their

behavior, such as any discussion or overt acts of ageplay. Owners of private sims off of

the mainland are free to enact rules that allow for mature or adult behavior, and even at

benign events like a sailing competition or a fashion show, child avatars are instantly

banned. No explanation is required. Sim owners regularly kick out and permanently ban

child avatars. In 2013, *kiskoshka Resident* took to the forum to complain about the

treatment he'd received as a child avatar:

> I can't even begin to express the tremendous hurt and frustration I feel
>
> over the discrimination and prejudice against child avatars that is
>
> absolutely rampant in SL. It happens a dozen times a week; I was recently
>
> told that a woman wouldn't sell me a prefab house because my child avatar
>
> offended her. Just today, I was ordered to leave an arcade on a moderate
>
> sim. The place was abandoned, there was no adult content whatsoever, but
>
> the sim manager approached me and told me to change my shape or get
>
> out.[84]

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[84] kishoka Resident, "REALLY Sick of discrimination against child avatars," *Second Life Community Forums,* February 12, 2012, http://community.secondlife.com/t5/General-Discussion-Forum/REALLY-Sick-of-discrimination-against-child-avatars/td-p/1404349.

In response, many residents mentioned their discomfort with child avatars, with *Porky Gorky* stating:

> The world is full of sick bastards who either abuse and hurt children or fantasize about such things. SL is an ideal environment for these perverts to role play their sick urges and desires….I am not saying that this is your motivation for being a child Av. However, based on what I have seen in SL in the past, I view every child avatar with suspicion.

Notice that *Porky* states that he doesn't know the reasons behind a resident's decision to play with a child's identity. His overwhelming assumption, however, is that the motivation rests in "sick urges and desires," a negative opinion passed on through habitus. Ageplay has mostly disappeared from the virtual environment because of Linden Lab's written rules, but *Porky*'s first thought remains based in the beliefs formed before those rules were put in place. Even in 2012, five years after ageplay was banned and basically eliminated, residents still react with unease when child avatars arrive. Since deeply held beliefs are critical pieces of habitus, society's conviction about child avatars marginalizes and casts suspicions on their activity, tightly regulating when, where, and how they can behave. The overt rules stated by Linden Lab dictate that child avatars can't engage in sexual activity, but habitus perpetuates the belief that child avatars are suspicious.

Once the practice was uncovered by the media, Linden Lab was confronted by pornography laws in Germany and the United Kingdom.[85] Faced with having the program banned in those countries, the company relented on its previous position of allowing the practice and made ageplay a completely banned activity.[86] The official wiki states that residents may use child avatars for fun and play, such as swinging on a playground or going to school.[87] Sexual behavior of any kind, including baring the "genital or chest regions," is strictly prohibited and can result in a permanent ban.[88] Without the need to confront child avatars engaged in ageplay, residents ceased the vocal opposition to the practice, but remnants of the original habitus remained. Child avatars are still viewed with suspicion in Second Life, despite the fact that ageplay has nearly disappeared from the grid. Even when child avatars are participating in the fun and games first proposed by *Steller Sunshine,* residents consider them deviant and suspicious.

Habitus grew from resident interaction with child avatars early in Second Life's history, but it continues today. New residents learn of habitus from the example of other

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[85] "Sky News on Second Life Wonderland," YouTube, 4:37, posted by nichenet, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN_jr6xjs90.

[86] Benjamin Duranske, "New Supreme Court Opinion Discusses Virtual Child Pornography Law; Linden Lab's 2007 Ban Clarified," *Virtually Blind* (blog), May 23, 2008, http://virtuallyblind.com/2008/05/23/ageplay-ban-clarified/.

[87] "Child Avatar," *Second Life Wiki*, http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Child_Avatar, accessed May 30, 2013.

[88] Ibid.

residents, such as when an older resident sees a child avatar and remarks, "Those avatars give me the creeps." Society also transmits habitus through the communication tools inworld, and it is through these powerful tools that residents reproduce the expectations and beliefs of habitus.

Communicating Habitus and Cultural Capital

Second Life communication happens along several routes, and each path reinforces how a user receives information, how a resident perceives performance, and how the avatar comments on the user's behavior. Each type of communication reinforces the other, establishing habitus through each interaction. The basic tools of communication are the same for every resident. Open chat works similarly to speaking at a comfortable volume in a room. Everyone within a small radius of the person typing can see what is being said in a scroll of text on the bottom left of the screen. For private conversations, a resident uses instant message. This type of message appears as a separate box on the screen, and only the people invited to the instant message can hear the conversation. The final type of communication tool is the group message. Residents can join up to forty groups, which can be everything from groups with common interests, such as book clubs or genealogy groups, to store sale groups. Groups can either chat in a format similar to private messaging or send out a notification, a small window that pops up with a message on every group member's screen.

While the ability to speak through the avatar is possible with the Second Life voice feature, most people choose to use the text-based communication tools. Anonymity is a key component in Second Life, and residents protect the fantasy of the life they've built in the world by blocking anything that would break the illusion. The text-based open

chat, instant messaging, and group chat allow people to perform as the characters their avatars represent. These tools take skill to manipulate, however, and while mastering a skill does give a measure of embodied capital, being able to type in open chat or instant message doesn't immediately give an avatar cultural or social capital. As Boellstorff explains, being able to communicate effectively in groups became a way of establishing a resident's place in society, especially in closed groups that required an invitation to join.[89] The only way to push up the ranks of society was by being able to type in a way that conveys the kind of emotions you would be able to exhibit in first life. This skill, called emoting, uses specific skills to mimic emotive actions during communication. As a critical embodied skill, residents use emoting to solidify their social connections and friendships while at the same time building their social capital. How to emote is a part of habitus, and users generally learn how to emote through the example of others at social venues, such as dance halls.

Since avatars have a fixed facial expression and limited animations, users found they needed special skills to show emotions. With everyone having the same poses, residents looked for ways to differentiate themselves from the other residents around them. As *Second Life for Dummies* phrases it, "Why look like a stiff robot when you can move naturally, give people a thumbs up when you approve of an idea, or flip a cartwheel when you're excited?"[90] While the authors of that guidebook suggest avatars can move "naturally," avatars constantly require the efforts of their users to move or talk or perform

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[89] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, 234.

[90] Robbins and Bell, *Second Life for Dummies,* 254.

any action in the virtual world. The word "naturally" suggests two things about Second Life. First, that the closer to a sense of first-life movement a player can get, the less he'll be reminded of the fact he is in a virtual world, and second, using built-in tools can produce this illusion of realism. The realism lends itself to a sense of presence of the other residents, making the avatar performances appear to be spontaneous in a way that mimics first life.[91] Such "natural" actions also suggest habitus at work. If something is considered normal and natural, that action generally is governed by the unwritten, invisible habitus.

Residents favor adding actions into open chat as the most popular method of nonverbal communication. One way they could show an action without the accompanying animation is through the /me command. By typing the command ahead of a sentence, the text window shows the action originating with the avatar. My avatar, for example, might wish to comfort a friend who was having a bad day. I might say, "I'm so sorry you're having a bad day," then follow that line of text with a /me command giving that avatar a hug. In the text window, this text is what would appear:

[20:29] Airtsela Charisma: I'm sorry you're having a bad day

[20:29] Airtsela Charisma gives Barb a quick hug[92]

[91] Smiljana Antonijevic, "From Text to Gesture Online: A Microethnographic Analysis of Nonverbal Communication in the Second Life Virtual Environment," *Information, Communication and Society* 11, no. 2 (2008): 221-38.

[92] When demonstrating lines from Second Life, I am copying the lines directly from the program.

To the uninitiated eye, these two lines of dialogue may look remarkably similar, but the lack of the colon in the second sentence means that a Second Life avatar would read that as an action taken, not as something said. In order for my avatar to perform the action of hugging someone, I would have to first purchase and activate a HUD (heads up display) that controls hugging animations, then request a hug from the other avatar, who would have to agree to perform the hug animation with me. All in all, those actions could take approximately thirty seconds to accomplish. Given the complexity of having exactly the right animation for a spontaneous moment, residents chose to use the relative ease and speed of the /me command to express actions.

Residents also use gestures to communicate non-verbal emotion. Gestures are single keystrokes or word commands that trigger a combination of text, sound, and/or animations. Some avatars are fond of the applause gesture, for example. When the phrase /clap is added to a sentence, a loud clapping noise is made, the avatar claps his hands for 2 seconds, and a line of text appears in open chat that says, "Applause!" Gestures can also have multiple lines of text that are added into the chat window, filling the screen with text. The problem with gestures is they can clog the chat window, create a lot of extra noise, and slow down the sim with lag. Many events forbid the use of gestures for these reasons. With gestures, a person will often receive accolades the first time the gesture is used, but she may be scolded if the gesture is used too often. This past Halloween at a dance at Frank's Elite, a popular dance hall in Second Life, *merlina carfield* handed out a witch gesture to all those present. In addition to the following text, a wicked laugh sound was triggered as well as a laughter animation that doubled over my avatar.

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: /\

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: __/____

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: ((^;^))

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma:))   ((

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: .)) -V- ((.

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: / .| ..... |. \

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: _|_) || (_|_/

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: /o (oo (o\

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: /' ===== '\

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: /' =====   '\

[10:24] Airtsela Charisma: Happy Halloween !!!

At first, the people at the dance found it delightful, and everyone triggered the witch animation. Within a few minutes, however, residents started commenting on how it wasn't as funny anymore. While the entire conversation won't be reproduced here, if you multiply the above gesture by twenty-three, the number of avatars present, you can begin to see how everyone setting off the gesture would quickly force the text in the chat area to scroll by quickly, effectively halting conversation since any other lines of text would scroll by too fast to be read. On top of that, the wicked laugh sound was conflicting with the music from the DJ. After a few minutes, the hostess asked everyone to put away their gestures so the dance could continue. Gestures can, therefore, shut down the social quality of the world just as much as they enhance it, and a delicate balance exists between using the gesture to enhance social capital versus clogging the world with what amounts to text and sound interference.

Taste plays a big role in how emoting is seen in the virtual world. It's in good taste to create a gesture, such as the one above, and everyone is welcome to enjoy it. If the gesture somehow interferes with the ability for others to communicate, however, society steps in to shut down the action. Interestingly, hostesses at dances rarely have to ask people to put away their gestures. At my first dance in Second Life, I was given an applause gesture that allowed me to clap for a song I particularly enjoyed. I tried it out immediately, and the avatar who gave me the gesture script said, "Yay! You got it!" She praised me not for using the gesture appropriately but for trying it out. The song hadn't ended, so it wasn't the right moment for the gesture to be used. I watched for the other residents to use their applause gestures, and then I realized it was appropriate to use the gesture five or six times at the end of a song. No one listed the rules for using applause gestures at the dance venue or during my orientation to Second Life. I acquired this habitus.

As new residents learn the unspoken rules of communication, like emoting and gestures, they begin to make connections with other residents and form friendships. Social capital involves both the number of friends as well as the quality of those friendships. This type of currency is about who you know and what those people stand for. If I'm friends with the President of the United States, I may find I have better jobs and more opportunities than if I'm friends with a local high school teacher. That oversimplified example would be only one layer in a person's social capital, which takes into account the people, groups, and networks each person has relationships with, "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and

recognition."[93] The combined effect of all of a person's relationships holds weight and influence, capital, that can be exchanged for favors and kindnesses that can help them move up the social ladder. In Second Life, residents gain social capital by learning the essential embodied cultural capital (the technical skills needed to communicate) and the invisible rules for using those skills (habitus). I gained friends at the dance where I first used a gesture because I demonstrated a willingness to learn how to use a gesture as well as patiently observing the community's use of that tool. By the end of the dance, several people offered me friend requests so that they could invite me to other dances, and I gained a small amount of social capital through these actions.

In the process of gaining capital and habitus, I began to switch my spectator position. Second Life is a distinct culture,[94] and new users must learn to use the new world's technical tools as well as the cultural norms and regulations. The user begins by looking in on the world and viewing the performances in the world using first-life cultural norms. Ulf Wilhelmsson makes a distinction between the user and the avatar at the beginning of an immersive virtual experience and explores how the user eventually becomes immersed in the world of the avatar.[95] That process takes time, and Wilhelmsson believes it takes several weeks before a user is able to ignore the mechanics of the game and become fully immersed in what is happening within the game space.

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[93] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 249.

[94] For an explanation and defense of Second Life as a culture, see Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, 53-70.

[95] Wilhelmsson, "What is a Game Ego," 49-50.

This research on the game ego supports the idea of a user's spectator position separate from a resident's viewpoint, especially in any new avatar's early days in Second Life. Jeremy Bailenson and Jim Blascovich detail a neuroscientific explanation for the user position and how the attention of the person switches between user's and resident's world.[96] They assert that as a person becomes immersed within the game space, she becomes completely accustomed to making the switch between playing as an avatar and stepping away to deal with first-life issues. A player, for example, can be fully immersed in the game, switch to first life to go get a drink, return to his computer and simply observe before jumping back into the action. The mind's ability to switch positions grows in correlation to the time spent in the virtual space. Bailenson and Blascovich would say that the resident spectator position grows as a person interacts with the game interface. In Second Life, since it lacks the narrative base of a video game, that position grows as the user learns the creative and social aspects of the world, including habitus.

Habitus is critical in making the transition from the user spectator position to the resident position. When first approaching the virtual world with a first-life habitus, users may find many activities in Second Life odd. I was startled the first time a blue fox walked up to me to chat because I hadn't become accustomed to the way Second Life residents accept fantastic digital bodies without question. In my early encounters with these residents, I brought my first-life prejudice against such roleplaying to the conversation, but as I became immersed in Second Life society, I grew to accept without

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[96] Jim Blascovich and Jeremy Bailenson, *Infinite Reality: Avatars, Eternal Life, New Worlds, and the Dawn of the Virtual Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

question any avatar body I came in contact with. My user's eyes still see such digital

bodies as strange, but my resident's perspective acknowledges the diversity of avatar

bodies and accepts their presence.

While information flows from the user to the resident, the communication pattern

doesn't end there. The circuit is completed with yet another spectator position, that of the

avatar looking out from inside the world to observe the user's performance. The avatar

may be controlled by a different user or may be the user's own avatar, but that

communication informs the user of how his performance is viewed from inside the virtual

world. Kristine Jørgensen talks about transdiagetic communication, a moment when the

interface of the program speaks out to the user.[97] While not specifically about Second

Life or other virtual worlds, her work suggests that a flow of information comes back out

to the user from the virtual environment. In Second Life, this transdiagetic

communication can be the pixels of another avatar appearing to reach beyond the screen

to speak to the user, giving the illusion that the avatar is observing a user's performance.

In the earlier example of *Katerina Devinna* and her thirty-one alts, other avatars felt free

to comment back to *Katerina*'s user. *Blemishque Wulluf*, the virtual wife of the man

involved in the affair, told *Katerina* at a recent dance that she needs to seek psychiatric

help for multiple personalities. That advice was not directed to *Katerina*, although

psychiatrists and counselors exist in Second Life. Instead, *Blemishque* was addressing the

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[97] Kristine Jørgensen, "Audio and Gameplay: An Analysis of PvP Battlegrounds in World

of Warcraft," *Game Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008),

http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/jorgensen.

user behind the all the alts, indicating that the user had multiple personality disorder because she operates thirty-one avatars with distinct lives. She was using her position as an avatar watching a performance to speak to the user behind the screen, the avatar position in virtual spectatorship.

In addition, Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson have studied the Proteus effect, which occurs when a user's avatar behavior changes how he perceives his behavior in first life and alterations he makes to first-life behavior after his virtual experience.[98] A user might find the avatar he crafted seeming to make comments on his first-life performance. Perhaps, in an exchange with another avatar inworld, this male user might find his avatar suggesting that the person behind the screen is far less of a fashionista than he (the avatar) claims to be. The user's avatar looks out on his creator, sees the difference, and makes the comment to another avatar. In one example of this effect, two groups of overweight participants were placed into fitness and support sessions, one in a first-life location and one in Second Life.[99] More participants finished the virtual program, and the virtual participants lost more weight than the first-life group members. The explanation comes from the Proteus effect. When the virtual participants could see

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[98] Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson, "The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior," *Human Communication Research* 33, no. 3 (2007): 271-90.

[99] Maria Korolov, "How Club One Lowers Your Weight and BP Virtually," *Hypergrid Business,* Sept. 30, 2010, http://www.hypergridbusiness.com/2010/09/how-club-one-lowers-your-weight-and-blood-pressure-virtually/.

the physical changes in their avatars, they were more motivated to lose weight in first life.

A Second Life user moves naturally between these spectator positions in first and second life. As the game ego develops, this communication pattern becomes seamless, allowing a person to move from the habitus of first life into the new habitus of the virtual world. When I was given the applause gesture, for example, I had to investigate new tools within the interface. Rather than approaching it from a resident's perspective, I as the user looked in upon the world and stumbled to find a way of using the gesture. I eventually found the appropriate button to activate the applause, and when I did, I was praised by people at the dance. I then shifted into a resident's spectator position, since I had to observe how the applause gesture could be used appropriately. When I learned to use the applause only a few times at the end of the song, I felt a wave of relief because I had figured it out. My avatar informed my user that I had pressed the right buttons at the right time because what I expected to happen (a line of text indicating applause) appeared on the screen. I could "hear" my avatar applauding, just as I asked her to do. While a simple example, this communication pathway delivers the information about habitus and capital from the world back to the user, who then assimilates that information into the way she interacts with the program.

One of the keys to this spectator model is that the information transfer happens covertly, under the radar of consciousness. The person using Second Life isn't aware of the shifting spectator position, but she is conscious of the needed behaviors as she moves to each spectator position. Habitus is an invisible societal force, and when a person seamlessly receives information from each spectator position, the necessary taste, values,

and behaviors can be communicated without interference from the conscious mind questioning the regulations. As a noobie moves from simple activities such as using a gesture appropriately to more complicated relationships inworld, the spectator position becomes even more critical. In order for intimate connections to form, residents must understand the habitus governing relationships.

At its core, Second Life is a social world, and the earliest residents quickly took advantage of all the social features, forming groups based on common interests or first-life geographical locations. Residents fashioned friendships and more intimate relationships, and as soon as animations could be imported, residents created animations to mimic intimate physical contact, from a simple hug to elaborate sexual positions. *Francis Chung* and *Laura Fauna* shot to superstardom in the beta world when they created the first hug animation tool, and residents began buying the device in droves as soon as it was offered.[100] Residents wanted to be able to see their digital bodies involved in physical contact with other digital bodies, a visual component missing from text-based virtual worlds that had come before. Designers can create any animation, and sexual play quickly became one of the most popular activities in Second Life. The virtual space can seemingly speed up relationships. As *Pannie Paperdoll* describes it, "I can't tell you how many times I've fallen in love on slow dance 3 [a popular couples dance animation]. You cuddle each other and lay your heads on each others shoulders. When you combine a

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[100] Paul Carr and Graham Pond, *The Unofficial Tourists' Guide to Second Life* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 206.

good animation with good conversation, it's a strong lure."[101] This play takes many

forms, from quick one-night stands to intimate relationships that last for years to couples

that decide to develop first-life relationships.

While many people decide not to have a romantic relationship in Second Life,

such residents limit the number of social activities available to them. Dances are one of

the most popular activities in Second Life. Each of the fourteen Second Life guidebooks

in print lists dancing as an essential inworld activity. Clubs are scattered across the virtual

landscape, and while each one has a different theme and approach, the general workings

remain the same. When an avatar arrives at a dance club, the first thing he has to look for

is a danceball. There is usually a prominent place for this object, since a user has to click

it to make his avatar dance. The large, spherical object usually floats in the air

somewhere in the dancing area and, when clicked, activates an animation script that

causes the avatar body to move in whatever dance the user has chosen. There are

danceballs for singles, but in the top one hundred clubs in Second Life, the couples

danceball is most prominently displayed.[102] When a resident arrives at a new club

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[101] Brian A. White, *Second Life: A Guide to Your Virtual World* (New York: Que, 2008),

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[102] This statistic is based on a tour through the top one hundred clubs listed by the amount

of traffic through a Second Life search conducted in October 2013. As of October 23,

2013, there were 3,441 dance clubs listed in the search functions of Second Life. This

number doesn't include music venues, private ballrooms, and other areas where dances

are held.

looking for a way to participate, the couples danceball is the most obvious choice because it is generally the largest object and placed in a position that is easily accessible. A club owner may place the couples danceball in a place hanging from the ceiling, while he places the much smaller singles danceballs beside the stage in a corner. The smaller an object is in Second Life, the harder it will be for an avatar to click. Since the couples danceballs are so clearly the focus of these clubs, the suggestion is that this popular activity is meant for two avatars sharing rather than single residents joining the larger group. The participation in dances flows with this concept as well. At a dance, residents may chat with the larger group for a part of the time, but there are always lulls in open chat as couples go into instant messaging to talk privately.

Dance club owners have arranged their clubs to cater to couples more than singles, and in the larger world, couples have more social activities available to them than single avatars. Without a companion, single avatars can perform activities that approximate work, such as modeling in a shop, or join group activities, such as a book club. Dance and other social events where coupling is encouraged are far more common. A survey of Second Life events for November 11, 2013, showed sixty-four dance events compared to only twelve other activities. Of those twelve events, five were for store openings, an event even more isolated than a book club or discussion.

While couples are encouraged, society doesn't favor specific types of coupling. Gay and lesbian couples enjoy the same freedoms as heterosexual couples in Second Life, but society grants those freedoms based on each resident's ability to maintain the illusion of a coherent identity, especially concerning gender. The avatar body did little to help that illusion in the beta era. The early mesh body had a flattened, deformed look that

could hardly pass as human, much less resemble the biological body of the user. Female avatar breasts, for example, could be set to a maximum size fifty-three on a slider of one hundred for a realistic look. Beyond that size, the breasts became deformed and boxy. Second Life residents became used to slightly deformed breasts, as they did with many other qualities of the avatar body that didn't mimic a biological body well. The mesh body imitates the biological body, but it does so poorly, only hinting at the culturally legible body of first life. The avatar body became the battle ground for virtual habitus.

Meredith Bricken, an early theorist of gender in virtual spaces, takes a utopic view of how residents of virtual worlds move within the confines of habitus, painting it as a free and open space:

> In a virtual world, we are inside an environment of pure information that we can see, hear, and touch. The technology itself is invisible, and carefully adapted to human activity so that we can behave naturally. We can create any imaginable environment and we can experience entirely new perspectives and capabilities within it.[103]

Rather than being spaces where residents could "create any imaginable environment," strict virtual habitus has constricted these performances. To "behave naturally" indicates that the natural has been described, determined, and regulated within the world of "pure information," sullying whatever purity or openness of potential might have existed.

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[103] Meredith Bricken, "Virtual Worlds: No Interface to Design," in *Cyberspace: First Steps*, ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 363.

Gender has become a part of Second Life culture, but how it has been inscribed into the avatar body is a complicated tale that is quite different from first-life gender configurations.

Choosing the body doesn't necessarily imply a connection to the biological body. Alluquére Rosanne Stone points out that just such a disconnection in virtual spaces results in unease to the user operating within the world, and so that user begins to look for warrants, or specific, gendered behaviors, that will give the anonymous digital body enough symbols of gender to make it legible. Bodies in first life are subjected to specific regulatory schemas that "produce and vanquish bodies that matter." [104] Bodies must offer a culturally intelligible, readable presentation, and so culture both produces these bodies through gender regulations as well as eliminating those that become culturally unintelligible. Stone extends this argument by introducing the idea of a warrant, a test grounded in the physical presence of the person that affirms or denies his gendered presentation.[105] If a sign says, "Behind this curtain stands a woman," a person pulling back the curtain would expect to see a female biological body.

According to Stone, the physical body is the ultimate warrant, and since that body is masked in Second Life, other warranting behaviors need to be in place to help residents read that body intelligently, and habitus keeps these performances specifically gendered.

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[104] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 14.

[105] Alluquére Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 79.

Joseph B. Walther and Malcolm Parks extend Stone's concept of warranting into cyberspace, using the concept of bandwidth to determine the degree of warranting value for actions in virtual space.[106] Each warranting activity has a kind of value based on the relative ease of use and connection to the first-life body, making it either a high- or low-bandwidth warrant. Choosing a female avatar, for instance, is a low-bandwidth warrant. A user only needs to click one button to make that decision. The choice has little to no connection to the first-life biological body at the moment of choice, and the decision is too effortless to deserve a higher level of warranting. In Second Life, choosing a gendered avatar is a low-bandwidth warranting process, but the choice doesn't ease the distress people feel when confronting an anonymous and possibly gender-bending avatar. Residents must commit to much higher-bandwidth warrants, those requiring more effort and investment, in order to ease the discomfort surrounding anonymity. To become a warranted female avatar, a user must commit to fashioning the female body correctly, learning proper communication patterns, performing as a woman at all social events, and, if an intimate relationship comes to fruition, participating in the ritual performance of marriage or birth to firmly solidify the commitment to the avatar body chosen. Society oversees each step of the above process and judges whether the warrant is correct based on the parameters of habitus.

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[106] Joseph A Walther and Malcolm Parks, "Cues filtered out, cues filtered in: Computer-Mediated Communication and Relationships," *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* eds. Mark L. Knapp and John Daly (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002), 529-63.

Many users gender switch in Second Life. Over seventy percent of both male and female users gender switch at some point in their second lives.[107] With so much deception, society fashioned habitus so that new residents would become immediately aware of the deceptive possibilities of the world. When I accepted my first dance in Second Life, the dashing male avatar made small talk for a few minutes, then asked me if I was a real woman. I responded by asking if he was a real man, and he laughed. "No one has ever asked me that before," he said. His reaction illustrates an important point of habitus. While both male and female users can gender switch, the female avatar body is viewed as more suspicious, resulting in the need for performances that stabilize the digital body.

Breasts became a symbol of the ability for a user to fashion a gender-switching avatar. Avatars can change the size of many bodily components, and by changing the settings around the chest, breasts can become quite large, culturally considered a clue that a male user is using a female avatar. While the settings of the mesh body allow for large breasts, enterprising builders created giant prim breasts that could be attached to an avatar's chest for an even larger look. Society considers any large breasts, either with the mesh body or with attachment prims, an almost sure sign that a male is behind the screen. *Isablan Neva*'s opinion seems to work for the majority: "99.9% of buyers of giant prim

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[107] Kyra Grosman, "An Exploratory Study of Gender Swapping and Gender Identity in Second Life," PhD diss., The Wright Institute, 2010.

breasts will be men playing female avatars."[108] Even large-breasted female avatars

without prim breasts called their users into question. On the forums, 1270 threads talk

about breast size and how to achieve a perfect look, and in sixty-eight percent of these

discussions, someone suggests that a man is sitting behind the controls of that

body.[109]*Pleasure Ashbourne*, for example, took to the forums to ask for help in creating

just the right look for her avatar, posting a picture of the breast look she was trying to

achieve. *Colette Meiji* chimed in to offer practical advice about how to achieve the look

Pleasure wanted, then told the story of how she created a custom avatar shape for a client

who insisted on large breasts, tiny waist, and large buttocks, a difficult challenge given

the avatar body's parameters. In response, *Susie Boffin* was quick to say, "I hope that he,

err I mean she, was happy with it."[110] Some female avatars will even attempt to point out

the warrant that small breasts afford them. *Rowan Derryth* states in her profile, for

example, "You can tell I'm a woman in RL because the size of my avi breasts won't

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[108] Isablan Neva, "Prim Breasts?" *Second Life Forum Archives*, April 13, 2008,

http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/56/253076/1.html.

[109] Statistics are based on a search for breast size in the Second Life Forum Archive and

subsequent reading and notation of the 1270 threads in that search. 864 of the 1270

mentioned male users posing as female avatars either overtly or through insinuation.

[110] Susie Boffin, "Breasts Like These!" *Second Life Forum Archives*, January 12, 2008,

http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/46/235068/1.html.

make me fall over."[111] What large breasts do for the avatar body is create a site of suspicion, a sign that may suggest further warranting is needed to believe the user behind the avatar actually has a biologically female body. That suspicion is transmitted through habitus as new users enter the world. The cultural memory of previous deceptions created the regulations currently in place to control gendered performance.

Habitus didn't exist when the world opened in 2002, but it grew from the earliest resident interactions. These invisible parameters for performance, taste, and expectations came to encircle cultural and social capital. Habitus limits how residents can perform within the space and, in turn, constructs how cultural and social capital is used to warrant gender in Second Life. Habitus holds the cultural memory of deception as well as the conventions and behaviors necessary to keep such negative behavior in check. Second Life society, with its built-in understanding of the anonymity surrounding the user, found a way to ease the collective fear surrounding gender with habitus, and those invisible parameters led to the performances of birth and marriage studied in this dissertation.

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[111] Rowan Derryth, Second Life profile, available through the Second Life viewer and search function, accessed February 23, 2013.

CHAPTER 3

GENDERED PERFORMANCE REQUIRED: POTENTIALS, THE POSITIONAL

GRID, AND THE LIMITS OF GENDER

When Second Life first opened to residents in 2002, the pioneers had access to an almost limitless array of gender potentials. As social connections formed between residents, residents found that so many potentials led to confusion and chaos in personal relationships. John Shotter notes that identity markers, including gender, have to be a part of an individual's performance in order for that person to have successful communication: "To be our social selves, to be individuals functioning within social and political communities, we need to *voice* our identities and so participate in the reproduction of these communities."[112] That social self cannot be created without interacting with other residents and having them weigh in on each person's performance. As the virtual world grew, residents began to bind gender to resident performance in order to ensure that communication could flow without chaos.

Through the rituals of birth and marriage, virtual society makes female and male avatar bodies conform to performances of femininity and masculinity. Gender-switching avatars can exist in this world, but if a user switches gender, he cannot be part of a virtual

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[112] John Shotter, "Becoming Someone: Identity and Belonging," in *Discourse and Lifespan Identity,* eds. Nikolas Coupland and Jon F. Nussbaum (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993), 1. Emphasis in the original.

relationship or family until he makes the decision to step into a consistent, gendered performance. This chapter argues that habitus, developing from interactions of early residents in the virtual space, requires coherent gendered performance in intimate relationships. Society created rituals of birth and marriage to ensure committed, enduring, gendered performances. I will combine the notion of habitus with Brian Massumi's work with the event space and positional grid to demonstrate how society formed regulations around gender in birth and marriage performances.

Early Second Life resembled what Brian Massumi terms an "event space," a place that exists when there is a large field of potentials and where corporeal beings enter into dynamic relationships that change the shape of the event space.[113] He uses the example of a field turning into a game of soccer. At first, the field is empty, with no boundaries, players, or rules for how the field should be used. A single person enters the field and begins kicking a ball, then another person enters to kick the ball back and forth. Soon, many people are kicking the ball wildly around the field, which turns into chaos. In order to turn chaos into order, the group gives players positions to play and a host of rules to follow. A referee stands in the field to make sure the players follow the rules of the game. What was once simply an open field turns into a soccer field, a bounded area of performance with specific rules and expectations. Players are defined in relationship to the field, occupying a specific role within the space. The potential still exists for a player

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[113] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 75-83.

to run off, kicking the ball out of bounds and ruining the game, but he is held in position with the expectations surrounding the space.

In Second Life, residents entered the open event space, filled with potentials for body and identity creation that included choices outside of first-life gender. As these residents interacted with the potential to mask the user's biological body, they determined which performances would be socially acceptable. Only residents who chose potentials within the accepted societal parameters could continue to enjoy the social and creative aspects of Second Life. By coming into contact with each other, these actors shift the potential of the space. When one resident tries a potential, the way other residents react determines how the field of potentialities will look in the future. When animal avatars first appeared, for example, society was faced with the performance of a potential: performing outside of the human biological body. Society then had to examine the potential and agree whether it would accepted or not. Just as with Massumi's soccer example, residents still hold the potential to perform outside of these boundaries, but habitus keeps them reperforming the same socially acceptable expectations.

Through dynamic interactions with other residents, these possibilities were gradually whittled down to allow only for the behaviors deemed acceptable by Second Life residents. This virtual world did not begin as a pure event space, since that would imply the complete absence of rules. Linden Lab saw Second Life as a hurried business opportunity, and the company didn't have the time to fully organize social aspects of the

world before allowing residents to enter the virtual space.[114] Because there was little

forethought put into the process of building the virtual society, Linden Lab had very few

written rules for resident behavior or creation. The only constraints on this event space

were the limits of the program itself. The first Second Life residents made decisions

about what behavior would be accepted in this new world through the trial and error of

their early interactions. I argue that this world became, therefore, an open space of play

for societal rules and the creation of habitus. The number of potential performances in

this virtual world far exceeded the already habitus-bound first life, and early residents

could and did play with the potentials available to them. The interactions of early

residents dictated the way performance boundaries were established for this culture.

As residents interacted with specific potentials, they also began determining set

boundaries for behavior, a framework that would govern future resident behavior.

Massumi explains that all actors within a society are placed on a framework that

classifies their bodies in terms of sets of binaries: child/adult, male/female,

gay/straight.[115] The grid eventually becomes so engrained in the participants that the

positions seem fixed and set, and the movement between points, the no-man's land where

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[114] Linden Lab was focused on other business opportunities and only used Second Life as

a testing space until investors took notice of the collaborative work in the virtual world.

For a full history of Linden Lab and its corporate decisions, see Thomas Malaby, *Making

Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

2009), 17-45.

[115] Ibid., 2-4.

transgression can occur, is obscured so that the grid seems fixed and immovable. Second Life had the barest minimum of a positional grid when it began, and even as bodies became defined, the movement between categories kept the categories fluid. Residents, for example, determined a human/animal grid position while playing with the basic starter avatar shape. Since Linden Lab determined that every resident would start his second life with a human shape, that body was the first point on the grid. Any other body shapes were defined in opposition to that initial point on the grid, so human/animal or human/inanimate object became binaries on the grid. Residents could explore potentials, but these potentials would always be defined on the positional grid based on the points that already existed.

Habitus works with the overt rules of society to bind a resident to the virtual positional grid. The earlier example of child avatars serves as an example of both dynamic interactions and the limiting of potential as well as the way bodies are defined within a positional grid through habitus and overt rules. As residents determined the social and cultural capital surrounding these performances, they established both written rules and the invisible rules of habitus. The culture remained open to the potential of child avatars until residents had a chance to interact with the potential and determine its reasonable place within the world. Most importantly, society had to determine how these bodies would be categorized on the positional grid, most critically in the binary of child/adult. Children should not engage in sexual activity, and since the adult position on the grid included sexual behavior, child avatars needed to have a grid position defined. Residents came across child avatars, observed their sexual behavior, and expressed their disapproval. The field of potentials allowed for ageplay, but the dynamic interactions

debated whether the ageplay potential should remain viable. The negativity around child avatars existed because of the interactions of residents with the potential.

At the beginning of the world the potential for ageplay existed. Dynamic interactions foreclosed this potential. Habitus similarly keeps child avatars bound to the positional grid by keeping up the suspicion of their identities in the minds of other residents. Residents may not see ageplay with their own eyes, but habitus roots mistrust so deeply in residents that child avatars become suspect without any evidence of wrongdoing. Bourdieu envisioned embodied capital as profound beliefs that unconsciously rule the status of individuals, and in the case of child avatars, residents who arrived after the rules about ageplay were put in place still feel the sense of unease with these avatar bodies based on the beliefs passed on from those avatars that helped form the regulation. The capital, however, developed from the interactions with the potential, not from regulations present when the world began.

Just as child avatars defy grid positions, the adult digital body similarly resists grid positioning. A female avatar body may be operated by a female user, but the possibility of a male user revealing himself keeps the digital body in movement between feminine and masculine. The residents inworld may see a female body, but when they look out to the user, there is never a guarantee that a female user body matches the avatar. To keep the body in its place, society structured a strict set of boundaries for gendered behavior, but it masks these boundaries as "natural" ways to perform. For child avatars, Linden Lab developed a system of age verification based on credit card information. While users can still fool the system and enter Second Life before they reach the age minimum of sixteen years, the verification system alleviates some fear of biologically,

emotionally, and mentally under-developed users entering into the adult space. Even from the earliest beta days in Second Life, users asked for a similar verification system for gender to ensure gender-switching could not occur.[116] By 2005, residents were vehemently calling for official gender verification.[117] Such a system would have been an overt mechanism for dictating gender, since a person's first-life biological body would have been verified and broadcast to the larger inworld community. These residents held the mistaken belief that verifying the biological body would also verify gender. Not only could the user substitute another biological body during the verification process, but connecting the biological body to gender is unstable as well.[118] I may give the outward signs of a female biological body in first life when being gender verified, but the possibility exists of my first-life body being equally hard to read. With so much uncertainty surrounding the practice, and without the support from Linden Lab to add such a feature, gender verification gradually faded from society's conversation, leaving the uncertainty still festering inworld. The avatar body still could not be reliably placed on the positional grid. Gendered performance remained unstable.

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[116] Daemioth Sklar, "Gender vs. Biological Sex," *Second Life Forum Archives*, October 12, 2003, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/13/57/5827/1.html.

[117] Meringue Pavlova, "Get Gender Verified?" *Second Life Forum Archive,* December 8, 2005, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/59/76158/1.html.

[118] In the 4,160 threads specifically on gender in the Second Life Forum Archive, most ended the argument by pointing out these problems. Gender was at issue, but the system and the level of anonymity it offered to the user were just as much in question.

In response to the idea of a gender verification system, residents revealed the true concern behind the need for gender verification. Several people mentioned that such a system was worthless, since, for example, a male user with a female avatar could have a substitute, such as a sister or girlfriend, make a phone or Skype call and make it appear that his avatar fit the digital gender. In the midst of this discussion, several people brought up the subject of relationships. *Cory Edo* commented, "I can see how some people may dig this. I've already been gender verified to the people I care about, so I'll pass."[119] This example introduces the idea of caring about someone. When "real" emotions are involved, any sort of gender play must end and the "real" self should be revealed. Others echoed the same sentiments, though sometimes in harsher language. *Meringue Pavlova* stated, "I dont think its about the sex issue but the trust issue. Most people would be annoyed if they had a 3 month friendship with somone who said they were a certain RL gender and found out they had been lied to all. Its about trust not sex,"[120] while *AlPacino Lightworker* hinted at the sexual fears behind the urgency for gender verification with his comment: "Yeah, I don't want no tranny surprise."[121] Just as Michael Rymaszewski notes in the official guide to Second Life, "No one will mind if

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[119] Cory Edo, "Get Gender Verified?" Second Life Forum Archives, December 8, 2005, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/59/76158/1.html.

[120] Meringue Pavlova, "Get Gender Verified?" Second Life Forum Archives, December 8, 2005, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/59/76158/1.html.

[121] AlPacino Lightworker, "Get Gender Verified?" Second Life Forum Archives, December 8, 2005, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/59/76158/1.html.

your avatar's of a different gender than *you* really are as long as they don't have a close personal relationship with you."[122] Gender-switching avatars had become accepted, but only within performances where intimate relationships were not a part of their social world.

These comments point to two distinct issues: the biological body as the marker of a "true" gender and a necessity for trust within virtual environments where everyone's biological body is hidden. Within Second Life, the impression a resident makes on those inworld may shift if the biological body is revealed. Erving Goffman points to the first impression as a defining moment in interactions, and once a person has made that impression, others will treat him according to the image projected.[123] Each person who defines himself in this way makes "an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind" while committing to never perform outside of that impression.[124] While Goffman was interested in first-life interactions, the same principle works within the virtual world. The difference between first and second-life impressions resides in the last qualification to Goffman's work: residents may present impressions of a type of person, but the commitment to remain within that specific role wavered. A resident giving the impression of being a man could suddenly change his role and present a feminine

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[122] Michael Rymaszewski et al., *Second Life: The Official Guide* (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 2007) 86. Emphasis in the original.

[123] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 11-14.

[124] Ibid., 14.

performance.

 The barrier between the user and the avatar makes any impression unstable, and since residents experience strong emotions in the context of virtual relationships, residents' ability to switch between avatar bodies and genders opened the possibility of heartbreaking role changes within the world. A first impression in Second Life could always change, no matter how well a resident performs the role. Some early residents trusted the first impression, fell in love, then found their first impressions didn't match the residents/users they thought they had been in relationships with. To try to prevent such heartbreak, society worked to stabilize gender performance by requiring specific rituals surrounding romantic relationships. Virtual habitus requires that a man playing a female avatar must change to a male avatar before entering into committed, long-term relationships or commit to a performance of femininity that matches the gender-switched avatar body for the remainder of her second life. To ensure this commitment, society demands a specific performance overseen by a societal agent that requires a heavy investment from performers. Ritual becomes the solution to ensuring this societal regulation is enforced, since these codified rituals have a role in "articulating a lifeworld, in sustaining and renewing culture, as well as in directing…deportment."[125] Because avatars performing these rituals demonstrate their commitment to gendered performance and appropriate deportment, rituals serve as a high-bandwidth warrant that alleviates the fear of other residents.

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[125] H. Tristam Englehardt, "Ritual, Virtue, and Human Flourishing: Rites as Bearers of Meaning," *Philosophical Studies in Contemporary Culture* 21 (2012): 29.

I rely on ritual theory because of the way this type of performance forces participants into set, societally-approved modes of performance. First-life rituals give participants the illusion of control by masking natural events with societal procedures.[126] I propose that rituals work similarly in Second Life, but rather than providing control over the natural, Second Life rituals control avatar behavior by harnessing the illusion of the natural to mask the virtual with social performance. In Second Life birth, no biological event occurs. There is no natural event to mask with a performance governed by societal procedure. Yet creators feel social pressure to manufacture scripts and animations that imitate first-life biological conception in the avatar body. The Tantra Total Woman HUD's creator, for example, designed his object to be worn only by female avatars. To imitate conception, the resident has to wear the Tantra HUD, and the device immediately detects whether the avatar wearing the device is in a female or male mesh body. If the body isn't female, the script won't detect sexual activity or determine whether the avatar has successfully "conceived." Tantra's advertising emphasizes the connection of biology with the avatar:

> What makes a woman a woman? Well, in real life the answer is obvious, women are fertile. Every single sexual encounter in real life carries risk for women, regardless of how well it is managed….The Tantra Total

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[126] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), 37-43.

Woman HUD gives you back your female cycle. No longer are you just a

doll with a female shape.[127]

The overt sexism in the advertisement works to push the female avatar body into the

narrowest definition of womanhood: the ability to reproduce. This HUD conjures the

illusion that the female avatar mesh and that digital body alone is capable of bearing

virtual babies, so the sexism associated with products like the Tantra HUD force the

female avatar body into a specific and tightly regulated performance. The potential not

only exists for male avatar bodies to carry a baby to term but for other genders to

reimagine a birth performance, but society limits the potential for conception to the

female avatar by wrapping sexual behavior in first-life biology.

Second Life rituals make it appear as though biology is critical to the performance

and solidifies the societal belief that gendered performance is required for intimate

relationships. To demonstrate how Second Life rituals such as birth and marriage impress

these values onto residents, I turn to Robbie Davis-Floyd's enumeration of the

characteristics of ritual.[128] These characteristics describe not only the process of the

ritual itself but the cognitive changes in the participants as well. At the beginning of the

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[127] Tex Evans, "Tantra Total Woman HUD," *Tantra Total Woman* website, 2010,

http://www.tantratotalwoman.com/products/tantratotalwomanhud.html.

[128] Davis-Floyd amassed these eleven characteristics from numerous other sources, most

notably essays in *Secular Ritual,* edited by Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff. For a list

of her references, see Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage*

(Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 8-9, 317n2.

cycle, the cognitive matrix, or the belief system of the society, is simplified and made to

seem inevitable.[129] The need for consistent, stable gendered performance rests at the heart

of birth and marriage rituals, but society simplifies that belief into issues of deception and

trust. The simplification of the belief system puts all of the ritual performers on the same

level, and in doing so, enables society to communicate the belief at the core of the

ritual—in this case, the need for gendered performance—to the largest audience possible.

Those residents who enter into birth and marriage performances sense the inevitability of

participating in the ritual, giving them the feeling of "locking onto a set of cosmic gears

which will safely and inevitably crank the individual right on through the perceived

danger to safety on the other side."[130] Second Life society intends for rituals to reduce the

danger of gender deception inworld. New residents learn to fear gender deception in

relationships and believe that marriage reduces the possibility of deception. When a

virtual relationship becomes intimate, either emotionally or physically, habitus works to

draw residents into the ritual through the fear of deception. Society also creates a sense of

inevitability surrounding the birth ritual by tying the process to biological reproduction.

The potential still exists for any kind of avatar body to give birth in any imaginable way.

If so desired, a resident could sneeze and collect his new child with a tissue. Instead,

society confined birth to a strict reproduction of first-life biological birth.

     Once participants have been convinced of the necessity for the ritual, society

designs the performance to deeply instill important values in the participants, the next

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[129] Ibid., 10-13.

[130] Ibid., 14.

step in the ritual cycle. Ritual bombards performers with symbolic elements during the performance as a way of surrounding them with the underlying societal belief system.[131] In Second Life marriage rituals, the elements gender the performers by requiring a choice between the "bride" or "groom" labels. Rings, dress, gendered animations all symbolically label gender within the ceremony. An inanimate object avatar may enter into a marriage ritual intending to disrupt the performance of gender, but in order to complete the ceremony, that resident will have to make a decision about whether to embrace the symbolism of the feminine or masculine because the symbolic elements require the choice. With birth, the elements strictly tie the avatar body to the first-life female biological body. The most potent symbol is the pregnant body itself. Special pregnancy body shapes alter a resident's appearance, and as pregnant residents move about Second Life, they herald their gendered performance through the symbolism of that altered body. That pregnant avatar body is surrounded by medical imagery, further tying the performance to first-life female biology.

Rituals perpetuate their power through repetition and redundancy.[132] The message within a ritual remains the same to emphasize the importance of avoiding the perceived danger. The potential for gender surprise existed in the early days of Second Life, but through the repetition of marriage and birth rituals, gendered performance was made to seem inevitable and kept any alternate potential safely contained. Participants willingly enter into the ritual because the staging, high drama, stylization, and intensification

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[131] Ibid., 9.

[132] Ibid., 10-11.

toward a climax in the performance results in a "high emotional charge that ensures long-term memory storage."[133] Second Life marriage and birth performers enact the symbolism of the ritual in highly-staged, specially built areas designed to reinforce the symbolism. Inworld weddings take place in elaborate chapels or specially-built fantasy locations, such as those areas for beachside ceremonies. Performers enter maternity clinics in order to give birth. After entering the staging area, wedding planners/officiants or doctors/midwives coach the performers through the ritual to achieve the sense of drama and stylization. When the climax of the performance is reached, when either the couple is pronounced married or the prim baby is "born," performers feel the sense of relief that the ritual "machine" has moved them from one place to another safely. The symbolism and staging of the ritual focuses the emotions of the participants and pushes them toward the relief of the ritual's conclusion.[134] The climax results in a long-term commitment to the memory of the ritual and the symbolism behind it, leading to another characteristic of ritual: maintenance of the status quo. The ritual's repetition reinforces society's values, the danger behind those values, and the inevitable need to enact the

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[133] Ibid., 15.

[134] Ibid. See also Victor Turner, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally Moore and Barbara Meyerhoff (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1977), 37-52; Eugene d'Aquili and Charles D. Laughlin, "The Neurobiology of Myth and Ritual," in *The Spectrum of Ritual: A Biogenetic Structural Analysis*, ed. Eugene d'Aquili, Charles D. Laughlin, and John McManus (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 177-8.

performance. This cycle perpetuates the ritual as well as strengthening the values behind it.

Second Life society requires a significant investment from performers in order to enter the ritual. Marriage and birth rituals require three kinds of commitment: economic, social, and cultural. Both marriage and birth demand the purchase of specific digital artifacts in order to complete the performance. While these items are not expensive in first-life terms, the prices reflect the highest price range in Second Life and the economic commitment of the performer to virtual society. Residents also demand the presence of community members at these performances. By attending, society witnesses and gives a blessing to the gendered performance, enforcing the gendered societal standards that make up the ritual performance. Since social capital includes the number and quality of friends, these guests represent the performer's investment and the potential loss should she not perform according to society's standards. Finally, these rituals stipulate that residents who perform them make their understanding of Second Life culture and its capital obvious to anyone observing the ritual. The guests and officiant look for items displaying the highest level of quality because using these items in the ritual demonstrates a commitment to the culture and its values. These three regulatory strands bind the avatar body to positions on the grid that make the digital body appear stable: male/female, gay/straight, mother/father. Residents who choose to gender-switch without committing to a ritual ignore these three regulatory mechanisms—economic, social, and cultural capital—and as a consequence, they are not allowed to enter into long-term intimate relationships.

In the cases of both birth and marriage, society uses ever-evolving ritual performances as a crucial regulatory mechanism. The specific requirements for each ritual connect to the three kinds of capital and their ability to regulate performance, though marriage and birth developed differently. The history of these performances reveals how gender is controlled as each element of the ritual becomes more tightly regulated.

Birth

Society reacted much as it had with the potential of child avatars to a specific potential in the development of birth ritual: the creation of prim babies. By establishing performance guidelines for family relationships in Second Life, birth placed the bodies of avatar mothers and fathers on the grid, taking away the possibility of any performances that do not adhere to a strict correspondence with first-life biological parenthood. The avatar body is an empty shell devoid of organs. Sexual animations simply place these empty hulls in what appears to be sexual activity, but no biological fluids are exchanged. In this virtual world, no one is confined to the roles of "mother" or "father" based on the user body. The first-life positional grid designations of parenthood are suddenly irrelevant, meaning that there were no societal controls over who could claim parenthood in the space when Second Life first opened.

Family roleplaying resulted from the social quality of the world. As residents became actively involved in the lives of others inworld, bonds formed that led to close friendships that led to residents designating mother, father, sibling, and other gendered extended family roles to other residents. Second Life family roleplay helped regulate how gender would be performed in long-term friendships through these specific roles, and

since oversimplification is needed for ritual, the roles are confined to the roles associated

with biological birth and the corresponding performances. *Linnian Sugar* describes how

family roleplaying works:

> it's more then a simple title, it's a whole second lifestyle, we really live and
> interact like a family, we got a nice comfortable home where we play and
> even sit down at the table for dinner where we some times have friends
> over.
>
> Our relationships with each other are great and very role play like at times,
> like where I may act out as kids do, or sneak a cookie out without asking
> and end up being grounded.
>
> Not every thing takes place inside the home, often we go out to events
> together and explore second life together, and when we are ready to log
> off or just stop RP for the day, mummy an daddy tuck me in and read me a
> story and check for prim monsters under my bed, and then every one
> settles down for the night.[135]

These seemingly mundane activities help to keep order within the roleplay, but they also

keep the bodies performing the acts under societal control. "Mummy" and "Daddy" tuck

in the children, so two avatar bodies have to be recognizable as female and male.

Even non-traditional Second Life families choose to perform in gendered

parenting roles. *Sam Vayandar* and *Sam Moleno*, for example, are members of a

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[135] Linnian Sugar, "Family role play," *Second Life Forum Archives*, June 22, 2006,

http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/58/115709/1.html.

polyamorous, homosexual male slave family. These two residents did not consider themselves in an exclusive relationship when they decided they wanted to parent a child. The potential existed for them to choose any number of ways to become parents, including having all thirteen members of the family perform parenthood, just buying the baby and beginning the performance, and even the potential of creating animations and body shapes to perform pregnancy in a male avatar body. Instead, the *Sams*, as they're known to their friends, chose to go through a lengthy adoption process at a maternity clinic. Forms had to be filled out, a representative of the clinic visited the polyamorous family's home, and the clinic owner finally granted permission for the baby to "come home." The clinic owner then "allowed" the *Sams* to buy the prim baby and begin performing parenthood. It should be noted that the *Sams* do not need anyone's permission to purchase a prim baby. Residents can buy these objects freely from a number of stores in Second Life without any need for another resident's intervention. The *Sams* told me they considered a surrogate, but they felt it would be too much of a hassle. They perform as two fathers to their son, gendered roles that identify them as male residents, despite their non-traditional family. No one else in the slave group claims parenthood for the child, though everyone plays with and enjoys the prim baby. Only the *Sams* hold the titles and responsibilities of fatherhood. Those gendered roles mark them as male residents and, since they weren't willing to undergo the commitment necessary for the birth ritual, they are considered to be male users on the other side of the screen.

Society noticed the absence of these parenthood grid positions when an enterprising resident created the prim baby. This object became a symbol of reproduction within a world where biology doesn't exist. *Bronwen Llewelyn* and *Jim Levy,* two

residents from the beta period and prim baby creators, give a clearer picture of how these objects came about. Pioneering residents in 2002 gathered in sandboxes to chat and create. *Bronwen* and *Jim* both explained that their initial experiences with prim babies were communal. They both either built or received their first prim babies in the company of others, and both describe the experience as "playful" and "full of laughter."[136] The community experience was a parody of first-life motherhood where the biological act of birth was unnecessary to become a mother. Both *Bronwen* and *Jim* said that birth was not talked about in these early days of prim babies and motherhood. In fact, *Jim* told me that male avatars would pick up prim babies and call themselves "mother" just as often as the female avatars. "The point was to hang out and tell stories. We just had fun. No big games or scripts or things. Justtelling funny stories about parenting."[137]

Prim babies came before birth ritual in the virtual world by necessity. Building tools were available from the first day Second Life opened, but custom animations, such as the ones needed for birth, could not be uploaded into the world when Second Life first opened for its beta test. That ability to upload custom animations came nearly two years after the opening of the beta world.[138] Animators began selling birth animations

[136] Jim Levy, Interview, August 16, 2012; Bronwen Llewelyn, Interview, October 12, 2012.

[137] Jim Levy, Interview, August 16, 2012.

[138] "The Virtual Whirl: A Brief History of Second Life," *The Virtual Whirl* (blog), June 26, 2010, http://massively.joystiq.com/2010/06/26/the-virtual-whirl-a-brief-history-of-second-life-2004/.

immediately as well as coding every type of imaginable sexual animation. Creators took

advantage of the biological implications of those sexual animations in 2006 by

introducing the first scripts designed to simulate reproduction. Today, the Mama Allpa,

Tantra, and Pooterbilt heads up displays, or HUDs, take up a small area on a user's

Second Life screen and run scripts that determine how the avatar body will perform.

After an avatar chooses animations that imitate sexual intercourse, the scripts in the HUD

decide whether the female avatar is pregnant or not based on the mathematical possibility

determined by an imposed menstrual cycle. These conception devices cost between 500

and 5000 Linden dollars, approximately two to twenty dollars US. With all of these

conception scripts, the mother must either have sex with a male avatar or go to a

maternity clinic to be inseminated. While the tools to perform birth without this step still

exist, the culturally accepted method of birth performance requires a biology-mimicking

step to begin the process. In addition, society's need to imitate biological conception also

pushes a female avatar towards an intimate relationship with a male avatar. In doing so,

this initial step binds the performers to gendered roles on the societal grid.

The female avatar who claims to be the first prim baby builder, *Andie Apollo,* also

was the first to begin setting regulations on the new objects and the avatar bodies who

claimed them. This Austrian-born content creator actively posted in the forums on a

number of topics, and her broken English and good humor made her a favorite with

residents. In late 2003, she made a famous post with the title "Stop to put babies in

boxes."[139] *Bronwen Llewelyn* describes the post as *Andie*'s horrified reaction when she

realized that some designers were making a baby as an object, putting it into a sale box,

then allowing the same baby to be sold over and over. Massumi refers to this type of

interjection in the event space as the insertion of anti-event space, a moment when the

referee suspends the game to point out a rules violation.[140] The anti-event suspends all the

potentials of the world and narrows the focus of the performance to the individual and

how he is performing at any given time. *Andie* was calling on the anti-event by

suspending the potentials for the prim child and placing all of the focus on the prim baby

creator who would dare to put a baby in a sale box. At this point, babies didn't cost any

Linden dollars, but to be picked up by any resident, these babies had to be put into a

special type of box that would place a copy of the contents—in this case, a prim baby—

into the resident's inventory once the user clicked on the box. For other baby builders

such as *Bronwen*, the box was a convenient way of allowing any avatar the chance to

pick up her creation. There were no social regulations as to who should be allowed to

hold a baby in his inventory. *Andie*'s anger over this practice stems from a belief that

prim babies should be specially made with the parent in mind. She made each baby

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[139] The original "Stop to put babies in boxes" post was lost in Linden Lab's accidental

forum purge of 2005, but others have quoted and copied parts of it in other threads and on

other message boards. See for example Andie Apollo, "Baby, Love, Peace!," *Second Life

Forum Archives,* November 27, 2004, http://forums-

archive.secondlife.com/120/c4/28446/1.html.

[140] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 79-80.

individually. Her babies were one of a kind, made especially for each couple. Her post

bemoaned the fact that these objects would be considered copyable, since every baby, in

her mind, was something to be treasured and taken care of, ignoring the fact that her

creations were made up of the same prims as a chair or a car.

Andie's anti-event comment called for a shift in how residents treated prim

babies. Rather than just being a topic of conversation, prim babies became objects of

imagination. As Kendall Walton posits, objects of imagination give substance to creative

flights of fancy: if a child calls a stump a bear, for example, that stump can be touched

and moved in a way that gives the imaginary bear substance.[141] A prim baby started out

as a collection of geometric shapes made to resemble a baby, but as people used it to

imagine their lives as parents, the prim baby went from being an object like a baby doll to

representing a living, breathing child. Andie Apollo was stating that the prim babies were

no longer just things, but in the minds of many, actual people coming to life in the virtual

space. This change in the prim baby's grid position from an object to living child

simplified the object to the point where it could be ritualized and controlled. The prim

baby symbolizes a biological child needing the care of mother to survive, and the ritual

performance requires a performance matching with the biological event.

Richard Wollheim's notion of iconic imagination sheds more light on why prim

babies, which look nothing like first-life newborns, could come to represent life in the

simplified way necessary for ritual performance. An iconic imaginative state is one in

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[141] Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the*

Representational Arts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 26.

which objects that exist in dreams, fantasies, and memories serve to represent a specific event in a different context.[142] A first-life child who fantasizes about being a mother enters an iconic imaginative state when a baby doll changes from a simple toy to one that represents the child being a mother. The child then uses the object (the doll) as a way of representing her fantasy in the context of play. Most importantly, the child would ask other people to recognize her iconic state. She may ask adults to hold her "baby," change the doll's diapers, or comment on the beauty of the child. Any playmate who doesn't recognize the doll as a baby would disrupt the child's imagining, resulting in negative emotional consequences. If the child approached the mother and asked to feed the "baby" a bottle, for example, and the mother threw the doll aside and claimed to be too busy, the child might erupt into tears because the object she believes is a child has been rejected.

The difference between the non-iconic and the iconic is subtle but powerful. If a Second Life resident attached a prim baby on an arm and said, "I'm imagining that this prim is a baby," the sentence would indicate a non-iconic state because the avatar is commenting on a moment of imagination, not including anyone else in the state of imagination. That avatar can still step outside of the imaginative state and comment on her imaginings. If the sentence changed to, "Isn't this baby beautiful?," the avatar is no longer reporting about an internal imagining but extending that imagining to include those around them. From a historical standpoint, babies could be sold in boxes because they were objects. *Andie Apollo* stepped in to say that prim babies were actually objects

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[142] Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 62-3.

of imagination that everyone in Second Life needed to recognize as such. When prim babies shifted from being objects of non-iconic imaginings to iconic imaginings, they moved from being topics of conversation to objects representing a first-life biological event. As iconic objects, the babies needed to be given an imagined place in the virtual world. Prim babies needed mothers and fathers, and *Andie* was really asking for social norms that would constrain the free, unpositioned performance of parenthood.

By claiming motherhood, residents stake out a gendered role when they decide to perform parenthood. The possible deception in this role is the danger underlying the birth ritual. Connecting first-life biology to Second Life parenthood stabilized motherhood to a gendered female position. Being able to pick up a prim baby and call yourself "mother" could allow a male user to buy a child and claim that gendered, female role. While Second Life accepts male users in female avatar bodies, society only does so when the female avatar conforms to feminine behavior and commits to masking the male user. The ability to claim motherhood without dedication to the gendered performance of parenthood denies the importance of the first-life biological event and, therefore, could allow a male user/female avatar the ability to be a mother without a commitment to the performance. Ritual, with its sense of high drama, staging, and necessary commitment to the process, hides the potential to use the symbolic prim child outside of acceptable gender performance.

Today's birth performance requires time, research, and dedication over a six-week period, alleviating society's discomfort with gender play by requiring the highest level of commitment from the avatars that choose to perform parenthood. During my time as a student at a Second Life medical school, I became the patient several times during birth

simulations. While my time being virtually pregnant lasted only twenty minutes, I strained to understand how my body might work while giving birth. Since I've never given birth in first life, I felt inadequate in my performance. Fellow students questioned some of my performance choices as I gave birth, wondering aloud if I were screaming too loudly during contractions or really understanding how it "felt" to give birth. The birth ritual demands knowledge from the participant about the menstruation cycle, fertility issues, and intimate knowledge of all the biological events taking place during birth. If a user is unfamiliar with that information, he might find himself struggling to make the correct comments and actions during the ritual.

William Lessa and Evon Vogt suggest that an absence of a ruler or a system of laws moves a society towards rituals as a regulatory device.[143] In Second Life, rituals begin with the need to regulate some object or behavior. Prim babies, a reminder of the absence of the biological body, generate a need to warrant the first-life biological bodies of the users choosing to perform motherhood. The ritual, therefore, began with a desire to develop a birth performance to go with the object, the first step in regulating the prim baby and the discomfort surrounding it. This kind of performance demands a commitment of time, social interaction with medical personnel, economic commitment through the purchase of prim babies and the accessories for those objects, as well as the cultural commitment to performing the ritual correctly. Adrienne Rich writes that in first life there are "two meanings of motherhood, one: the *potential relationship* of any

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[143] William Armand Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 77.

woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring the potential—and all women—shall remain under male control."[144] In Second Life, a space where no controls existed at the beginning of the world, all avatars were free to explore the potential relationships of their avatar bodies to reproduction and children free of the constraints of biology. Rich's second meaning of motherhood, the institutional meaning, also didn't exist in Second Life's early days, yet as avatars performed motherhood, they spoke out to the users, saying, "Look what we can do that you, in first life, cannot." The response to this free play around motherhood was to impose the kind of institutional control that limits the potential for avatars to perform motherhood. Birth ritual became a way to strap down the female avatar body to the positional grid with the three regulatory strands of economics, social interaction, and cultural norms. To do so, norms had to be put in place to bind the virtual performance to the biology of the female body, short-circuiting the avatar's ability to claim a gender- and biology-free version of birth performance.

Within Second Life birth, rituals grew around the high priests of birth: the midwives and doctors who own the clinics and perform the birth ceremonies for avatars willing to undergo the ritual. Lessa and Vogt describe the priest as someone whose power comes from societal code as well as transmitting that same code to the participants themselves.[145] Max Weber describes priests as "a particular group of persons in the

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[144] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986), 13. Emphasis in the original.

[145] Lessa and Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion*, 410.

continuous operation of a cultic enterprise, permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups."[146] The owners of maternity clinics are the keepers of birth animations and, by association, the coded performance that is built into those animations. Second Life residents are free to buy the animations on their own and perform birth without a clinic, but society directs them to these places to ensure that those given the power to regulate the ritual can do so.

Second Life doctors become the keepers of the three regulatory strands that position motherhood performers on the gendered inworld societal grid. They are taught to understand the "best" prim babies to suggest to patients, and the most popular choices are the ones that demand a high level of economic commitment for months after the birth ritual. Zooby babies, currently the most popular item and the one my Second Life medical professor spoke of most highly, can cost up to forty dollars US per week to ensure the baby's growth. These babies also can become ill through a script embedded in the object, and when they do, the mother must take the child to the doctor to receive medicine and attention. This script not only necessitates further economic commitment, but the avatar mother must also return to the high priest (doctor) to receive a social and cultural check-up of her motherhood skills. At one point during my Second Life medical school training, my professor showed us her two Zooby children. One of the objects began emitting a sniffling noise, and the professor became instantly defensive. "I've had a lot to deal with in real life lately," she said, "And I haven't got time to go to the clinic.

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[146] Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 30.

Doesn't make me a bad mother (laughter)."[147] One of my fellow students offered to use our equipment to take care of the child, but the professor refused because "my doctor gotta have a look at her." While the possibility existed for her to have the problem solved easily and quickly, the social and cultural regulations in place insisted that she take the child to the appropriate doctor. Motherhood in Second Life keeps the avatar body in check through these regulations, with the avatar doctor performing the role of the person given the authority to both enforce the regulations and bind the other's body to the positional grid through the careful coaching of the performance.

While there is absolutely no rule that states that a mother can only perform the birth ritual through these clinics and with these regulations, habitus guides residents to these facilities. People who ask for advice about how to perform pregnancy are told privately and publicly to search for a maternity clinic or given advice about which clinics offer the most realistic experience. Forum posts offering such advice, for example, begin in 2007 and continue to the present day.[148] As *Samaira Vieria* explained in 2007, "Normally you go to a maternity clinic & buy a pregnancy program, this normally lasts for six weeks."[149] The curious word in that post is "normal." At the beginning of Second

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[147] Class, August 29, 2013.

[148] Based on a survey of posts in the Second Life Forum Archives. The lack of any reference to maternity clinics prior to 2007 may be due to the accidental purging of the Second Life forums that occurred in 2005.

[149] Samaira Vieria, "Pregnancy and Childbirth in SL," *Second Life Forum Archives*, July 23, 2007, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/d5/199273/1.html.

Life society, no such clinics existed, and so such behavior couldn't be considered "normal." The clinics and the people who work within them became the keepers of the three-stranded regulatory system for birth and prim babies that kept birth controlled and warranted.

The development of prim children caused a social schism by highlighting both the absence of the biological body as well as the freedom of gender in the early days of this virtual world. In redressive ritual, a social schism requires society to deal with chaos resulting from the break with a specific performance that reestablishes society and the places of its members.[150] Regulated birth performances keep gender in check with intense performances of first-life female biology. If performed correctly under the guidance of the virtual midwife or doctor, the female avatar proves that she has knowledge of the first-life biological body, enough to warrant her in the virtual world and reduce the unease surrounding her gender. In turn, the female avatar, by entering into the ritual, commits to a performance that mimics the first-life biological body in a way that also promises the continued performance of that gender after the ritual concludes. For that type of ritual to be in place, Second Life society needed to determine the codified form of the ritual, which took several years of testing animations, clinics, performance types, and symbolic elements before it became a part of the societal norm. With prim doctors at the helm, this performance carefully observes and regulates the performance of the female avatar body, warranting it within the Second Life culture.

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[150] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Experience* (New York: PAJ, 1987), 39-41.

Marriage

The user's biological body becomes the key point of contention in the formation of and control over gender norms in this virtual world, both in birth as well as marriage. Without a way to instantly and irrefutably check avatars' digital bodies against the corresponding users' biological ones, early Second Life residents never felt sure of the biological body operating the other residents in their world. Society's suspicions of the female avatar body stem from rumors and stories of avatars gender-switching in the world. The first couple to marry in Second Life did so as a way of celebrating their choice to live in a heterosexual relationship in first life, an act that seemed to solidify their gendered avatar performances. By choosing to repeat the elements of that ritual, residents gave their blessing to the values behind the performance, namely gendered roles that were stable in both first and second life. Society celebrated that union with significant investments of cultural and social capital, giving, in effect, their blessing on not just the union but on the lack of gender slipperiness within the couple's performance. Through that first marriage performance, society formed a position on the grid for acceptable relationships, and economic, social, and cultural regulations designed to keep that position secure surround the ritual.

The history of that first couple reads like a romance novel. *Charlie Omega* and *Lynnix Muse*, two of the early beta testers of LindenWorld, met and fell in love as avatars. After two months inworld, they made plans to move in together and get married

in first life.[151] *Charlie* was known as one of the best scripters in the new virtual world, and the couple had friendships with some of the best builders and creators in Second Life. Their wedding, the first in Second Life, was attended by Lindens and ordinary citizens alike in a specially designed chapel space built by *Charlie* himself, a precursor to the elaborately staged wedding chapels of today's ritual performances. The wedding was not a small, private affair. The entire Second Life community was invited to attend. Charlie posted their wedding invitation on the forum:

> The honor of your presense
>
> is requested at the marriage of
>
> Charlie Omega
>
> and
>
> Lynnix Muse
>
> On Thrisday the 27th. of
>
> February at 8:30p.m.
>
> At the New Roman Palace
>
> Located on sim Federal
>
> 205, 163

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[151] Wagner James Au, "Travels with Charlie (and Lynnix)," *Notes from the New World Blog*, accessed via the Internet Wayback Machine, April 29, 2003, http://web.archive.org/web/ 20060215203121/http://secondlife.com/notes/2003_04_28_archive.php.

r.s.v.p[152]

Even with the misspellings, this invitation is designed to mimic a first-life wedding invitation. The language and even the rsvp suggests a formality usually foreign to the playful forum entries in this world but not absent from ritual performance. The staging, high drama, and stylization put this performance apart from others in the emerging world, and it set the tone for how the ritual would emerge. The burgeoning virtual society did, indeed, treat this wedding as a grand formal affair. Hamlet Linden, known as Wagner James Au in first life and one of the historians of the world, devoted an entire blog post to the wedding, and Hamlet and other Lindens graced the ceremony with their presence. The first wedding had the kind of social, cultural, and institutional capital necessary to make a distinct impression, and today, the day is memorialized at two museums in Second Life as well as in the Second Life history wiki.

While the builders brought their creations to the event free of charge, the lavishness of this initial ceremony set the precedent for the economic requirements of this ritual. While *Lynnix* made her own wedding dress, for example, wedding planners send Second Life brides to several boutiques to pick out the perfect expensive dress. Contemporary wedding planners, in fact, point couples toward objects they have deemed appropriate for the ceremony, such as animations, wedding cakes, and floral arrangements. Cultural capital has been given to these items with economic capital falling in line with the importance of the objects. Linden Lab devoted a front-page spread about

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[152] Charlie Omega, "The Wedding," *Second Life Forum Archives*, February 26, 2003, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/3a/1136/1.html.

the first wedding in the Second Life website's newsletter, and the description of the

ceremony focuses on the need to create items for the ceremony.[153] The article pays

special attention to the custom-built venue, the food created for the reception, and the

special outfits designed by each guest for the special day. While mention is made of the

happy couple, the article is as much a celebration of the creative possibility of Second

Life as it is for *Charlie* and *Lynnix*. The article wraps up by saying, "Thanks -- and

congratulations -- go out to the happy couple and all the participants who created this

event. Everyone can look forward to many more spectacular social events in the future --

all it takes is a little creativity and a few friends."[154] Weddings in Second Life, therefore,

became as much about demonstrating cultural capital by recognizing and celebrating the

creativity of designers inworld as about formalizing relationships. By investing cultural

and social capital, society announced that this wedding was a major event worthy of

significant capital expense.

At the same time as *Charlie* and *Lynnix*'s nuptials set the economic tone, they also

put in motion the guidelines for social observation of the ritual. The whole of Second Life

was invited to this event, and today, wedding rituals stipulate that the bride and groom

invite all of their friends. While some of the weddings I observed had small groups of

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[153] "Wedding Bells: Second Life Residents Tie the Knot in Style," *Second Life Blog*,

accessed through the Internet Wayback Machine, April 1, 2003,

http://web.archive.org/web/

20040406124018/http://secondlife.com/newsletter/2003_04_01_archive.php.

[154] Ibid.

observers, all of the couples indicated that they had invited their entire circle of friends. With all of the people at these performances, another cultural tradition grew into the marriage ritual: the reception. At the end of the marriage ritual, the participants gather to dance and enjoy a few hours of conversation with the bride and groom. This cultural tradition grew to represent the final approval of the couple's performance. If they perform the ritual correctly, the couple is celebrated by the gathered guests.

The fact that *Charlie* and *Lynnix* were together in first life becomes a pivotal point in reviewing the history of this first wedding. By giving their collective blessing to the union, society formed an expectation around this gendered performance: Second Life romances can move to first life. Since first-life romance deals with biological functions of sex, the ritual helps society come to grips with the anonymity of the user's body. *Charlie* and *Lynnix* made sure they documented how they met in Second Life, fell in love, and met in real life on the forums. Two days after their Second Life wedding, Charlie posted, "Today is a big day for Lyn and I. We will be meeting IRL [in real life] for the first time........I am sooooooooo anxious, I am also meeting her family too. I talked to her mom and one of her sisters on the phone and they seem cool☺ Wish us luck and happiness ☺."[155] Twelve hours later, Lynnix wrote a reply in the thread entitled, "Sitting on his lap haha:" "So far its been beyond a great meeting. We made an instant bond

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[155] Charlie Omega, "IRL Meeting :-)," *Second Life Forum Archives*, March 1, 2003, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/4f/1184/1.html.

beyond the connection we made in SL. (Match made in SL)."[156] Charlie chimed in to say

they were not going to be inworld for a few days, implying they were completely

wrapped up in each other in first life. Finally, a few days later, Charlie concluded the

story by saying, "As some of you know from lastnight, we are back online for the most

part. We are now living together☺ So if you see either of us in world, we both see you.

Also if we are unresponsive, or away alot,well nuff said lol ☺)."[157] The first Second Life

wedding was strongly associated with a first-life relationship, and several subsequent

Second Life weddings inworld also were associated with first-life relationships.[158]

Because the partners had met each other and warranted their biological bodies, marriage

ceremonies were associated in the early world with first-life relationships. The ceremony

was the culmination of a first-life warranting procedure, and because of the effort needed

to put a ceremony together, the ritual became associated with warranting avatars within

Second Life, with or without an actual first-life relationship.

[156] Lynnix Muse, "IRL Meeting :-)," *Second Life Forum Archives*, March 1, 2003,

http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/4f/1184/1.html.

[157] Charlie Omega, "IRL Meeting :-)," *Second Life Forum Archives*, March 5, 2003,

http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/4f/1184/1.html.

[158] *Ama Omega* and *Alek Wu* as well as *Maerl Underthorn* and *DaveZeeman* were

together by September of 2003. These two couples announced both their virtual and first-

life relationships in the forums. See Ama Omega, "Bye!" *Second Life Forum Archives,*

September 26, 2003, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/72/5538/1.html.

While *Charlie* and *Lynnix* were defining marriage and first-life warranting on the positional grid, another couple was dictating the opposite side of the new grid binary. *Torley Wong* and *Jade Lily* discovered that instead of toying with a first-life relationship as a lesbian couple, they were actually entertaining the idea of a first-life male homosexual relationship. *Torley* started life much as any other avatar, but he quickly showed adeptness at building content and navigating the virtual world. More importantly, he became a helpful resource to new residents, a role he continues to occupy today as the maker of video guides on a wide variety of Second Life information.[159] He held significant social and cultural capital in his role as a mentor and guide to new residents. While he used a male avatar for a few days at the beginning of his virtual life, *Torley* eventually decided he preferred a female avatar, and it was in that digital body that *Torley* met *Jade Lily*, another female avatar. They began a relationship in the virtual world that led to a partnership and a wedding. When their inworld lesbian relationship developed to the point where the possibility of meeting in first life was suggested, *Torley* decided to reveal his first-life biology. At the same time, *Jade*, too, revealed that she is controlled by a biologically male user. Suddenly, what was originally a lesbian relationship became a male homosexual one.

The revelation was startling for both the couple and those around them because it highlighted how the performance of their relationship depended on gender. *Torley* and *Jade* were accepted and treated as women because of their choice of avatar bodies and

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[159] "User: Torley Linden," *Second Life Wiki*, May 27, 2013,

http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/ User:Torley_Linden.

their dedicated performances. *Jade* joined in October of 2003. *Torley* joined sometime in late 2003.[160] In these early days of the world, the majority of social interactions happened in public sandboxes. *Jade* and *Torley* fell in love while in these areas in full view of a community of other avatars, just as *Charlie* and *Lynnix* had seen their love blossom in these public spaces. Both couples were free to perform as they wished in this space because the potentials each were exploring had not been accepted or rejected by society.

When *Jade* and *Torley* discovered their biological bodies didn't match the bodies of their avatars or the gender those digital bodies presented, the revelation affected the community as a whole because it put a potential into a dynamic interaction with society. Second Life today resembles a major metropolis. Avatars are rarely aware of an event happening in areas they infrequently visit. *Jade* and *Torley*'s relationship played out in front of a crowd far more like a small town with a couple hundred people. Everyone knew the story and heard about their first-life bodies once the revelation occurred. Second Life society as a whole interacted with the potential for first-life romance

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[160] This information comes from Torley and Jade's profiles in Second Life, but Torley's states that he began using Second Life in September of 2004. This date, however, refers to his incarnation as Torley Linden, not as his first avatar, Torley Torgelson, or his first alt, Torley Wong. Torley speaks of events, including the rocket wars, which happen before September of 2004 as someone with firsthand knowledge of the events. Torley was also known to have several additional alts, all of which have disappeared from the Second Life search engine. See Torley Linden and Jade Lily, Second Life profiles, May 27, 2013.

blossoming from inworld relationships, with *Torley* and *Jade* showing the potential of what could occur when the biological body of the user didn't match the shape of the avatar. *Torley* and *Jade*'s relationship was placed in opposition to *Charlie* and *Lynnix*'s match. While the latter couple found their relationship could transfer to first life without alteration, *Torley* and *Jade* could not continue their inworld relationship in first-life without shifting their sexual preference.

Virtual society focused most keenly on avoiding deception in relationships, and I would argue that *Torley* and *Jade's* revelation played a big role in forming habitus and the backbone for the marriage ritual. By adopting female avatars, these users were masking their biological bodies. Virtual society judged this practice to be deceptive, since an intimate relationship like the one that developed between *Torley* and *Jade* could transfer into first life and result in a sexual preference shift. Deeply held beliefs make up a part of embodied capital, and while *Torley* and *Jade* were loved and respected, their decision to gender-switch wasn't always greeted with enthusiastic acceptance. When *Torley* and *Jade* revealed their first-life bodies, it was to a group of people who had taken them at face value as women. The pair of female avatars continued to operate within the community, but not everyone was overjoyed at the gender play *Torley* and *Jade* performed in front of the Second Life public eye. *Prokofy Neva*, a prolific blogger of Second Life experience, was unimpressed with the hoopla surrounding the couple:

> Torley for a long time had a very public relationship with Jade Lily, a man in RL [real life] with a female avatar. The two were constantly cited by people like Hamlet [Hamlet Linden, in first life, Wagner James Au] as an

example of the gooey SL wonderfulness where two heterosexual males who in fact weren't gay in real life could have this beautiful relationship. Far from swooning over this SL version of slashfic [slash fiction] some of us sort of rolled our eyes. There's nothing wrong with being bi or gay, of course, so the fiction of being heterosexual in RL yet gay in SL, or merely Platonically wonderful, always gets a bit of a second look.[161]

Prokofy is voicing an opinion I believe became embedded in the virtual habitus. While she states that there's nothing wrong with being bisexual or gay, she gives the impression that an avatar body that doesn't match the user's biological makeup is not a wonderful thing because she believes there is no possibility of an avatar being gay while the user remains heterosexual. If a male user who claims to be heterosexual in real life puts on a female avatar in an effort to begin a relationship with a male avatar in Second Life, she views that male user as actually being a homosexual in first life who is testing the waters of homosexuality in the virtual world. In other words, people who are willing to gender shift in Second Life are suspect and are hiding their true motives. More importantly, the post calls into question the motives of two male users using female avatars and suggests that while they claim to be attracted to a member of the same sex only in Second Life, their motive actually is to have a homosexual relationship. Other posts in the forums suggest a similar bias. *Azzle Gotter* started a poll in a 2008 thread that included the

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[161] Prokofy Neva, "Torley's Newspeak," *Second Thoughts* (blog), June 18, 2008, http://secondthoughts.typepad.com/second_thoughts/2008/06/torleys-newsp-1.html.

question, "Do you often suspect anyone of playing a gender not their own?"[162] In the sixty-two responses, eighty-four percent indicated they did suspect others of gender-switching. Tellingly, in these responses, nine residents elaborated on their answers by indicating a suspicion of female avatars run by male users. In another question in the same poll, *Azzle* asked, "Do you treat players differently based on their avatar's gender?" The respondents were evenly divided on this question, but within the group that answered no, almost half mentioned that they didn't alter their behavior towards people they met in passing, suggesting that gender means more in intimate relationships. Male avatar *Anti Antonelli* responded to last question, saying, "My SL skirt-chasing days were short lived and ended long ago and I can't think of any other reason I should care about the sex of the person controlling the avatar."[163] The possibility of an intimate relationship fueled *Anti*'s suspicion of other avatars. Dekka Raymaker offered a similar response to the survey question: "I understood this to mean, if your a male have you ever played a female avatar to get into bed with another male kind of question."[164] These responses, like several others within the thread, suggest that sexual activity requires verification whereas common contact does not. *Torley* and *Jade* represent the problem of sexual contact

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[162] Azzle Gotter, "what gender do you play?," *Second Life Forum Archives*, April 16, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/fe/253712/1.html.

[163] Anti Antonelli, "what gender do you play?," *Second Life Forum Archives*, April 16, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/fe/253712/1.html.

[164] Dekka Raymaker, "what gender do you play?," *Second Life Forum Archives*, April 16, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/fe/253712/1.html.

without verification. Such relationships can lead to situations where a user could be drawn into a first-life homosexual encounter. This survey, taken almost five years after *Torley* and *Jade*'s revelation, demonstrates a suspicion of the female body as well as the need to verify the user body within a sexual relationship. Despite the statistics that suggest female users gender-switch with healthy regularity, the male user is the one brought into the spotlight of suspicion, and the question of who is behind the female avatar becomes the primary issue. It is the female avatar body that must be controlled in this virtual world. The male avatar, which still holds the possibility of deception, is not under the same kind of scrutiny, though the male body, too, is controlled by the gendered animations and objects throughout the world. In my study, in the twenty weddings and ten births I observed, two female avatars were controlled by male users, but only one of the female avatars revealed a biologically male user body to others in Second Life during my observations. That resident, *Chevy Bravin*, has since changed to a male avatar.

Second Life avatars are taken at their face value in relationships in the virtual space. If I choose to be a female avatar, I will be treated as a woman in my virtual interactions so long as my performance continually demonstrates and commits to a feminine performance. If some event challenges my performance as a woman—perhaps I slip, accidentally turn on voice, and reveal my biological male voice—my performance will be suspect, but not yet offensive enough to deserve social censure. If that avatar body wishes to partner with another avatar, either male or female, then my commitment to a gendered performance will be questioned, and some method of warranting must occur. When I reveal my first-life biology, I am disturbing the idyllic nature of the virtual world, calling attention to the disconnection between my first-life self and the digital avatar I've

developed. Revelations cast long shadows, reminding residents that anyone near them could be living a lie. As social norms in Second Life have evolved from its earliest days, society built performance expectations into virtual life to help shield residents from the unexpected deception of a gender-switching avatar revealing the biological body behind the screen.

Social norms not only developed over time but moved into a diffused but unified sense of habitus. Linden Lab started offering private sims away from the mainland in 2005, signaling a shift from the public performances of early Second Life to more private ones. Avatars no longer met in common areas in a central location, but began to disperse across the virtual world. New residents still filtered through the same process needed to gain virtual habitus, but the reasons behind habitus became obscured and naturalized. I propose that residents carried with them the positional grid positions that arose from the stories of relationships such as *Charlie* and *Lynnix* and *Jade* and *Torley* as they traveled across the virtual world. Both the appropriate (intimacy based on first-life relationships) and inappropriate (masking biology and entering into a relationship deceptively) kinds of relationships were remembered and formed the beginnings of a new, virtual habitus. Bourdieu insists that habitus is dependent on memory and history, while Marcel Mauss further elaborates by suggesting that habitus embeds itself in the daily practice of societies and the individuals within it.[165] As the early pioneering residents dispersed to

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[165] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Marcel Mauss, "Les Techniques du Corps," *Journal de Psychologie* 32, no. 3-4 (1934): 5-23.

the larger world of Second Life, they carried the memories of the early days and the potentials that are considered acceptable with them and passed those practices, habits, and beliefs on to new residents entering the world.

I did not have the memories of *Torley* and *Jade* or other gender-switching avatars when I arrived as a new avatar in Second Life, but I was quickly indoctrinated with the many ways to find out whether an avatar was telling the truth about gender. I was asked the question, for example, of whether or not I was a "real" woman several times in my first few weeks of Second Life. The questions came so easily and lightly in early conversations that it never occurred to me that a communal suspicion was being transferred to me. I learned to put my first-life picture on my profile and to reference enough about my hobbies to convince other avatars that I was who I presented myself to be. In hindsight, the whole process felt very smooth and seamless. It never occurred to me to question why I needed to warrant my biological body. I even actively engaged in looking for clues in other people's profiles to see if I was being fooled. These behaviors are not ones I arrived in Second Life understanding or even performing. I was carefully taught to look for clues about avatars around me and to be sure I was above suspicion.

My own experience points out how virtual habitus can become entrenched in someone within a virtual society, and the rituals discussed in this study show the end result of a virtual habitus predicated upon the assumption that gender-switching is not only occurring with regularity but with an intention to deceive and entrap others into intimate relationships. The need for ritual in Second Life arises from a strong emotion. The fear of being deceived and tricked into a relationship governs the need for birth and marriage as warranting activities within the world. Kevin Donovan writes that ritual

addresses the kind of fears seen in this virtual habitus: "[Ritual] has its use as an emotional control in crisis situations, whether of great joy, apprehension or sorrow: birth, marriage and death, unique days in the life of the individual, yet equally important for the society to which he belongs."[166] These rituals remedy the apprehension surrounding the veiling of the biological body by replicating rituals that mark transitions in the biological body. By acting out these passages in life and committing to their performance, these ritual performers relieve the tension surrounding their gender by warranting their avatar bodies. John Beattie believes ritual draws people because of the layered reasons behind the performance:

> People…act symbolically or expressively, whether because they like or have a natural propensity to do so…, or because they hope that, like empirically founded techniques, it will produce results, or from mere force of tradition and habit, or—as I believe—from a combination of these and perhaps other reasons. For my present purpose it is enough to assert that people do so act, and that their action calls for its own specific modes of explanation.[167]

Beattie's three-layered reason behind ritual applies to Second Life perfectly. While I question the word "natural," residents certainly bring a propensity for behaviors they know in first life into the virtual world. Habits and traditions started in 2002 when Second Life opened its doors propel these rituals forward, and while virtual habitus keeps

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[166] Kevin Donovan, "The Need for Ritual," *The Way* 11, supplement (1970): 5.

[167] John Beattie, "Ritual and Social Change," *Man* 1, no. 1 (1966): 66.

the purpose behind the rituals hidden, they give the illusion of producing results for society by keeping gender in check and being performed in line with accepted norms.

Marriage rituals unveil themselves as warranting behavior when viewed within the framework of Second Life society. With the unrest surrounding the veiled biological body of the user, marriage and birth both ask for committed, long-term performances demonstrating gendered behavior. The choice of animations, the willingness to participate in each level of the performance, and the intimate relationship with another avatar become central to each ritual, resulting in a relief of the tension surrounding anonymity due to the willingness of the performer to maintain a gender category.

Jacques Derrida speaks of mourning and the need to be able to identify and make present the "bodily remains" of the dead:

> One has to know. *One has to know* it. *One has to have knowledge.* Now, to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies—for it must stay in its place. In a safe place….Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where—and it is *necessary* (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there.* Let him stay there and move no more![168]

The biological body in Second Life is just such a body needing burial. The new Second Life society in the early days of the world stepped in to position gender within a specific

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[168] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9. Emphasis in the original.

framework, effectively killing off the potential of the user's body to interfere within the virtual space. Gender, however, is tricky in a world without the biological body. The body can be buried, but it has a nasty habit of returning if it isn't placed firmly on the positional grid. Rituals give the illusion of keeping gender in place through economic, cultural, and social regulations, but very little prevents those performances and regulatory devices from falling apart. Residents have no fear of physical harm, and if a reputation is lost, a new avatar can be made to appear from the ashes of the old, rising like a phoenix away from the social position dictated for the old body. Biology haunts Second Life not as a passive ghost but as an insistent one constantly heard in the whispers of its residents: is she really a (wo)man behind her screen?

Birth and marriage represent the beginning and middle of a biological life cycle, but it should be noted that death plays a role in the world of Second Life rituals. Here Derrida's specter once again rises. Avatars who delete their accounts permanently, emptying their accounts of everything having to do with their virtual lives, often return in another form. Second Life deaths have to mark the end of a life cycle of an avatar, but there is no body to be identified and no permanent place for it to stay. More importantly, a body once dead can suddenly be resurrected. Avatar suicide can be the end of a user's involvement with Second Life, but it can also be used as a jumping off point for the beginning of a new life. Alts can be created. Death is never permanent. The veil between the user and the world means that they can fool others into thinking they are dead without placing a verifiable body in a permanent, safe place or, most importantly, a verifiably gendered body.

Bodies must maintain points of stasis along the societal grid, conforming to the binaries put in place by society.[169] Moving from one point to another, even if that point is from a socially acceptable position to a transgressive one, still positions the body on the master ideology's grid. Other bodies, though they occupy different points on the grid, are compared to the first body, and the act of comparison places those other bodies on the grid as well. Movement between these positions is restricted to the points on the grid. If a person attempts to take a position outside of an established position, the new position will still be judged on the position that came before. When defining the difference between position and movement, Massumi declares, "When positioning of any kind comes a determining first, movement comes a problematic second."[170] Deciding to start a new avatar just places a user back on the grid, not moving away from its confines. If a new alt wishes to enter into a familial relationship or get married, society creates a sense of inevitability to guide her into a ritual performance to confirm the commitment to gender. In this world of computerized light and shadow, society has imposed very real limits on the behavior of those who wish to live in the world, and to combat those limits, performers must return to the promise of the virtual world from the early days of Second Life, giving life to virtual possibilities.

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[169] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual,* 2-3.

[170] Ibid., 3

CHAPTER 4

MARRIAGE RIGHTS: REGULATING INTIMACY

Marriage ceremonies in Second Life are not about love. Marriage in the virtual world has very different rules and purposes than its first-life counterpart. Many residents view marriage as a revolving door of partners. As one resident playfully describes inworld marriages:

> I, John, take you, ~~Walter Andre~~ Jane, to be my ~~lawfully~~ virtually wedded wife, my ~~faithful~~ my eternal love ~~from this day forward~~ for three, maybe four months tops. In the presence of ~~God~~ Phillip Linden, ~~our family and friends~~ and whoever could log in, I offer you my solemn vow to be yours alone (promises exclude my Alts)[171]

Second Life relationships are often fleeting—of the twenty marriages I observed, only three are still in a committed relationship—yet these short-lived partnerships are routinely celebrated with lavish rituals. With 49,846 wedding items for sale in the Second Life Marketplace, marriage is clearly a popular source of content creation within the world. [172] Dancing, one of the most social of all Second Life activities, has 42,171 items

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[171] Balzac Blackheart, Second Life profile, accessed May 17, 2013.

[172] Second Life Marketplace search for "wedding," https://marketplace.secondlife.com/, May 17, 2013.

available, followed by surfing with 6,183 items.[173] Many of the wedding items are

intended to show a couple's love for each other, such as personalized wedding rings that

send messages to each partner when they're logged into Second Life.[174] When a partner

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[173] Second Life Marketplace search for "dancing" and "surfing,"

https://marketplace.secondlife.com/, May 17, 2013.

[174] One example of this type of ring is the Soulmate Jewelry line from Ashira's Aerie

Creative Jewelry store in Second Life. The description of the ring says, "Soulmate

Jewelry is designed for couples. The jewelry bonds with it's Owner and with One selected

Soulmate. This bond is PERMANENT. Once the Soulmate Jewelry is bonded is will

recognize your Soulmate whenever they come within 10 meters of you. It will send you a

customizable greeting from them and release a little poof of hearts. It will also announce

when they are Online, come Online, or go Offline. As long as they stay close the

Soulmate Jewelry will pulse slowly in their presence like a heartbeat. It will also

randomly send you Love Notes from your Soulmate along with another heart poof. All

features are menu controlled and have many customizing option .. including the option to

turn them off. The messages, petnames and lovenotes are the fun part of the Soulmate

Jewelry. They allow you to send messages to your beloved that only they can hear. All

messages are sent only to your Soulmate and not on open chat channels. Lovenotes and

messages are stored on a notecard inside the jewelry making it easy to edit them and

allowing unlimited lovenotes." See Butterfly Kisses Wedding Rings, *Second Life*

Marketplace, https://marketplace. secondlife.com/p/Butterfly-Kisses-Wedding-Rings-

SM5/3877727, May 17, 2013.

wears this type of ring, it glows red and sends out a shower of hearts when the other partner approaches. Not only do these rings send messages for the loving couple, but anyone near them is aware of their performance of love.

Second Life marriage and weddings are very public performances intended to show a committed dedication to gender, not to the virtual relationship. As Nancy Cott suggests of first-life marriages, "*Any marriage represents personal love and commitment, [but] it participates in the public order.* Marital status is just as important to one's standing in the community and state as it is to self-understanding."[175] Rings provide a public display of love, just as a marriage ritual performed in the open areas of Second Life demonstrates a resident's understanding of and commitment to what it means to be gendered in this virtual world. The relationship can be homosexual or heterosexual. Second Life's respect for tolerance and openness allows for many different types of sexuality, but these partnerships must always reflect a gendered performance. Inworld weddings ensure that the residents assuming roles as bride/groom, bride/bride, or groom/groom continually perform woman/man, woman/woman, or man/man. Marriage in Second Life means as much to the strengthening of society as it does to the relationship of the two avatars performing the ritual, since this ritual eases the tension surrounding the anonymity of the user body. The marriage ritual defines a performance of femininity and masculinity that gives the appearance of gender stability within intimate, sexual relationships.

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[175] Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

This chapter begins with an overview of the marriage ritual's current form, followed by a discussion of the economic, social, and cultural regulations necessary to bind residents to committed gendered performances.

Second Life Wedding Ritual

Though not as tightly regulated as birth, each of the twenty weddings I observed followed a specific pattern: opening greetings between the wedding party and the guests, the bride's arrival, the vows, the kiss, and the dance following the wedding. Mark Meadows describes these virtual performances as "rituals that helped to define the culture they [the residents of Second Life] had invented."[176] Each section of the performance has significance to the way gender is reified through the ceremony, and performers' constant repetition of the same elements generates the redundancy needed to simulate stabilized gender.

First, guests greet all of the other avatars they know at the wedding as they arrive for the ceremony. Guests are invited strictly based on their relationship with the bride or groom and the social capital they bring to the ceremony. In eighteen of the twenty weddings I observed, these invited guests chatted for between twelve and twenty minutes ahead of the bride's arrival to greet each other and share inside jokes and comments. This time established communitas ahead of the ritual. Turner describes the act of people coming together for a rite of passage, such as marriage, as a time of establishing

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[176] Mark Stephen Meadows, *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life* (New York: New Riders Press, 2007), 44.

themselves within a community to give the rite a degree of weight in that same group.[177]

The greeting period allowed guests to say hello and introduce themselves to avatars who

might not be a part of their social group. Social capital for each person is assessed, and

sharing stories and opinions with this group allows for the spent exchange and display of

capital. By the time the pre-wedding socialization is finished, everyone is aware of the

amount of social capital in the room. Friendships are put on display and, in essence,

placed as a tantalizing hint at the capital the couple has invested in the ritual.

In a shift from first-life weddings, the bride shares in this social time despite the

fact that her avatar isn't yet present at the wedding venue. Because of Second Life's

private messaging communication, the bride can be chatting with all of the guests even

while she remains at a distance. Guests speak in open chat about these interactions, and in

fourteen of the twenty weddings, friends transmitted the bride's words to the larger group

by repeating them in open chat. Every performer in the bridal party, therefore, is aware of

the social aspect of the wedding. The guests are there to observe the ritual, and if the

bride and groom perform correctly during the ceremony, society celebrates the newly-

committed gendered positions of the avatar bodies.

Once social capital has been exchanged and communitas established, the next

phase of each wedding is the arrival of the bride or the person in the place of the bride.

Even in same sex weddings I attended, the guests always waited for one half of the

couple to teleport from another location to begin the actual ceremony. When the bride or

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[177] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine,

1969), 132.

equivalent arrives, she begins to follow the set animations laid out by the wedding

planner/officiant. Officiants have control over many of the animations used in the

ceremony. Thirteen of the weddings I observed used animations that were controlled by

the officiant. The resident in that role would decide when the bride walked down the

aisle, when the bride and groom would turn to face each other for the vows, and when the

marriage would be sealed with a kiss. This resident acts as the high priest for the

ceremony, a role that stands for "the generic authority of tradition."[178] Ritual performance

must be redundant and repetitive to stabilize the belief system behind the performance,

and the high priest holds the authority to ensure that every performer adheres to the

guidelines.[179]

The couple answers the guests' legitimization of their union by sealing their new

bond with a series of kisses. Kiss animations can be quite elaborate in Second Life, and

every couple I observed used a kiss at the end of the ceremony and frequently throughout

the subsequent reception to demonstrate their avatars are involved in simulations of

physical intimacy in gendered ways. These poses have a dominant position, the one

initiating the kiss, and a subordinate position, the one accepting the kiss, which can be

read as masculine and feminine. By openly and publicly displaying their affection in a

gendered animation, guests are pacified that the pair is committing to a gendered

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[178] Ibid., 103.

[179] Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Berkley: University of

California Press, 2003), 8-9.

performance inworld. Each kiss would be followed by compliments and catcalls from the guests, another legitimization of their gendered performance.

Once the first kiss occurs, the couple is seen as officially married. If the couple didn't do so before the ceremony, this point in the ritual is when they would add their partner's name to their profile. At *FivenRye Free* and *Glassy Randall*'s wedding, for example, the guests actually stopped chatting at this point in the wedding to allow the pair the time to add each other's name to their profiles. The couple then announced it grandly to the group.

> [08:58 PM] Melody Baxton: Wait…you guys kissed and youre not even partnered?
>
> [08:58 PM] Jeff Demar: No way
>
> [08:58 PM] Cataplexia Number: hahahaha
>
> [08:59 PM] Bob Chase: Its time, Fiven
>
> [08:59 PM] Glassy Randall: Yes! I want the name!
>
> [08:59 PM] MillyAnn Morgana: Whip him into shape, F
>
> [08:59 PM] Maeve Juliesse: lol
>
> [08:59 PM] FivenRye Free: I have to take her name, too?
>
> [08:59 PM] FivenRye Free: No one tells me anything!
>
> [08:59 PM] Melody Baxton: lol
>
> [08:59 PM] Fallon Diesel: lol
>
> [08:59 PM] Glassy Randall: Ladies and gentleman, my husband…
>
> [09:00 PM] Fender Bender: rofl
>
> [09:00 PM] Slizzer Montoya: Get on it, Fiven!

[09:00 PM] Falcon Boa: hahahaha

[09:00 PM] Maeve Juliesse: lol

[09:03 PM] MillyAnn Morgana: not done yet. Just checkd their profiles

[09:03 PM] Slizzer Montoya: Takes a second

[09:04 PM] FivenRye Free: Everybody ready?

[09:04 PM] Rosie Lavochkin: Yes

[09:04 PM] Falcon Boa: yes

[09:04 PM] MillyAnn Morgana: yes

[09:04 PM] Fallon Diesel: yes

[09:04 PM] Fender Bender: yes

[09:04 PM] Slizzer Montoya: Show us already!!

[09:04 PM] FivenRye Free: Check them now

This example shows how one couple nearly skipped this step, but the group stepped in to insist that it be done. In partnering, a user exits the program, goes to the Second Life website, and offers partnership to another person through one of the tabs on the avatar's dashboard. After paying the 25L fee (approximately ten cents US), an email is sent to the other avatar in the partnership to accept the proposal. At that point, the name of his partner appears in the avatar's profile. This process may seem unrelated to the ritual, but partnering symbolizes the commitment necessary to the ritual. By having another resident's name listed on her profile, a resident announces her intention to participate in intimate relationships. The process is occasionally done ahead of the ceremony, but in nineteen of the weddings I observed, this action was referenced during the reception and following the completion of the ceremony.

Finally, the newly married couple and their guests move to a new location for a dance. Dances in Second Life are the backbone of social interaction.[180] Across virtual communities, dances become a way of casually talking while enjoying mutual interests in similar music genres. Many romances begin during a slow dance at one of the clubs in Second Life: at the time of this writing, there are approximately 3,487 clubs with the top club, Everlasting Romance, a Dutch-speaking, beach-themed club, seeing traffic over 109,000 unique avatar visits per week.[181] Conversation moves freely during the social period ahead of the bride's arrival, and with the exception of only two weddings, the reception/dances that I observed included a lot of joking and general merriment, what you would expect from a close-knit group of friends. This point in the ritual is when the social capital invested by the couple begins to show a return. Assuming the wedding has gone as expected, guests share stories, joke, and congratulate the couple.

Weddings offer a multitude of ways in which gender must be performed for an audience waiting to legitimize the actions and reify gender. Within this performance, specific regulations keep the avatar body in the gendered roles. The following section examines the three strands of regulation and how they confine the avatar body to gendered positions on the positional grid.

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[180] Meadows, *I, Avatar*, 56-7.

[181] Results based on a search for "clubs" in the Second Life search engine. Traffic is listed in these results. Search conducted January 12, 2013.

Economic, Social, and Cultural Regulations

Virtual society controls the economic conditions of marriage and the gendered code inside that performance through the economic commitment needed for setting and staging. Second Life weddings are grand displays. None of the twenty weddings in my study could be described as bare bones or frugal. The venues were grand, ranging from private villas on the ocean to a recreation of the Hollywood Hotel. While wedding planners who own their own venues are prepared to perform weddings on the spur of the moment, the five planners/officiants that I spoke to all agreed that the longer an avatar plans for her wedding, the better the final result. Much of that view stems from the cultural capital in the first wedding in Second Life. The best builders in the early world contributed to *Charlie* and *Lynnix*'s wedding, an event that celebrated not only a first-life relationship but the ability for this virtual society to commit to a generous outpouring of creativity. Residents made everything from a custom wedding dress to a wedding feast complete with a cake to a bridge overlooking a bubbling stream for pictures. Residents' creative objects in this first wedding stood for friendship and camaraderie in the new world, a social commitment to the new society.

The cultural capital attached to these object in contemporary Second Life still hold a social commitment based on the values, and that capital drives the wedding industry today. The world hosts a Second Life wedding expo every year with over a hundred stores participating in each event. Weddings are larger-than-life performances, but economic regulation isn't necessarily tied to Linden dollars. In the exchange of goods in Second Life, avatars can attain items either through creating the objects themselves or by investing the time to find low- or no-cost items. Despite the tendency for freebies to

be worthless builder castoffs, Second Life creators do offer promotional prices on clothing in an attempt to lure customers to their stores. A search for wedding dresses on the Second Life marketplace shows several hundred wedding dresses priced at one Linden dollar with many others priced at less than 500 Linden dollars. The highest priced wedding gown on the marketplace is a 12,000-Linden-dollar creation, worth fifty-one dollars US. Gown designers will create custom gowns for around the same high price. Economic regulation in Second Life centers around both time and virtual money. Avatars demonstrate commitment through either taking the time to hunt for bargains, making the items themselves, or purchasing items for the ceremony. Since weddings are lavish, many objects are needed to develop the perfect virtual environment for the ceremony. An altar for the ceremony, flowers for the bridal party, and tuxes for the groomsmen cost anywhere from one hundred to 500 Linden dollars per item. If a couple decided to get married without the benefit of a wedding planner, the cost of an average wedding would run somewhere between 16,000 and 20,000 Linden dollars.

The economic commitment helps to stabilize the ritual by funneling performers to the appropriate high priests to oversee the ritual. Society emphasizes the benefits of economic commitment while also providing a way to do so without the need to spend exorbitant amounts of money. In the twelve wedding planning advertisements in the latest issue of *I Do*, Second Life's inworld wedding magazine, half of the vendors mention their affordability while all stress their one-stop convenience.[182] Wedding

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[182] Pac Lorefield, *I Do*, Second Life inworld magazine (August 2013), http://issuu.com/ idwnmagazine/docs/idwnvol1_iss6?e=5761749/4199042.

planners offer packages as low as 3,500 Linden dollars. If a newly-engaged couple

bought all of the items used in that same wedding package, they would pay triple that

amount or more, making it cost effective to consult a wedding planner and use their

facilities rather than attempting to perform the ritual without such advice. In reality, the

practice gives wedding planners control over the ritual, allowing it to remain repetitive

and redundant.

Residents display economic commitment either through the building of items or

by choosing items already on the market. The wedding planners/officiants in the world

ask the couple to consider these choices when they plan the day. If a couple refuses to put

the commitment into the planning, that couple is viewed as a frivolous relationship that

won't last. As one wedding planner told me:

> [11:30] Sandie Turbo: I worry about the couples
>
> [11:30] Sandie Turbo: I'm the one that stresses over the weddings
>
> [11:30] Sandie Turbo: making sure all the details are covered
>
> [11:30] Sandie Turbo: not that some care – lol- you know the ones who
> won't make it

In *Sandie*'s mind, her commitment to putting together the wedding venue should be

matched by a couple's care and commitment to their own ceremony. If they don't exhibit

that level of caring, the couple's relationship is in jeopardy.

Society masks the true intention behind economic commitment by suggesting the

connection between relationship longevity and choosing the correct wedding items.

Recalling that avoiding deception is an important factor in virtual habitus, the marriage

ritual asks avatars to put their money where their mouths are, so to speak. For residents of

Second Life, a small or hastily-planned wedding shows a couple either doesn't understand the rules or purposefully avoids them for deceptive purposes, such as hiding a biological body incongruent with the avatar.

Even with the help of a wedding planner, couples are expected to make myriad decisions regarding the ceremony prior to the event, a necessary expenditure of time and cultural capital as a demonstration of commitment. *Isablan Neva* gives some idea about the planning needed to pull off a Second Life wedding in a forum post from 2008:

> 1) Make a backup plan in case SL goes into the toilet on your wedding day.
>
> 2) DJ - unless you are buying a package deal someplace, you'll want someone to handle the music. They will need their own stream. It is a good idea to test the stream about 1 hour prior to the wedding to make sure all is working. Plan for them to have "house" music going starting at about 20 minutes prior to the ceremony.
>
> 3) Officiant - this is the person performing the ceremony. Make sure you go over all details and plans with them before the wedding day. Even write a basic script and timeline....
>
> 4) Items - unless you are buying a package, you'll need some basic items. Will the officiant stand at a podium? What sort of poses will the couple need? Will you want poses for the maids of honor, etc? You'll want to rez those items and finalize placement at about 1 hour before the ceremony.
>
> 5) Rehearsal - best to get everyone to do a quick walk-through just after the items are in place. This is a good time to figure out who is going to say

"go" for the start of the ceremony and who is going to cue the DJ and bride. Assume that the bride will be out of chat range and everything needs to be handled via IM.

6) Location arrangement - you can stage a wedding just about anyplace, be creative! The one thing to keep in mind is that they whole thing needs to take place within a 20m space so guests and everyone else can stay in chat range.

7) Guests - you'll be limited by the SL as to how many. They will begin arriving about 20 minutes before the ceremony and at least half of them will be late. Plan for a 15 minute delay in your start time to accommodate latecomers. Someone in the wedding party - NOT the bride or groom - should have a copy of the guest list. This is SL and people wander haphazardly around. The landowner will be able to boot anyone who makes trouble but it takes time to find out whether or not they are an invited guest behaving badly or an interloper.

8) Organize, organize, organize. Do as much planning as you can (while still keeping in mind that this is SL, sometimes sh*t just happens and you have to roll with it.) The better you plan before hand, the more time you have on the happy day to worry about hair, dress and why the hell you can't find your shoes in inventory.[183]

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[183] I am purposefully not explaining all of the terms in this guide to Second Life weddings. For many residents, these terms would be just as confusing as for my readers,

Many of the tasks listed in the above post are advanced Second Life skills, and the amount of work that avatars have to consider and plan for within a short amount of time turns marriage from a simple ceremony into a complicated event. As *Isablan*'s final injunction states, the more time a couple puts in ahead of the wedding, the better the day will be. Assuming some residents would be without the skills necessary to accomplish all of the tasks, *Isablan* goes on to recommend using someone's sim already set up for weddings and taking his advice on how to plan it. Most importantly, this post highlights the three regulatory strands of the ritual. She points out how the items (animations, dress, shoes, podium) necessary for the ceremony regulate the economic aspects, the guests represent the social aspect, and the officiant and the script written prior to the ritual and presumably approved by the officiant makes the wedding conform to cultural norms.

Officiants control many of the regulations within the marriage ritual. Couples, with the advice of wedding planners/officiants, choose the elements for their ceremony, investing time and Linden dollars into the activity. These performers consciously create the environment for their wedding, but virtual society controls gender in these rituals by codifying the performance so that gender becomes naturalized. A bride's poseball is pink. A groom's poseball is blue. Wedding planners can simply consult or sell items to prospective couples, and it isn't unheard of for residents to get married in their homes or

leading them to choose a wedding planner/officiant who can assist them navigate the necessary cultural aspects of the ritual. Isablan Neva, "Planning a SL Wedding?," *Second Life Forum Archives*, November 30, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/110/eb/295396/1.html.

other areas outside of wedding sims. The wedding planner/officiant more subtly guides the couple to making culturally accepted choices. Wedding planners place approved items in their stores, design wedding areas that could be considered culturally acceptable, and offer their services as officiants for the ceremony. From the outside, the couple appears to have control, but in reality, the choices they are asked to make are culturally controlled by the high priest. In all of the twenty weddings I observed, the couples consulted a wedding planner/officiant to some extent before the ceremony.

Kay Schaeffer suggests that cyberspace creates a place where "the body becomes a screen onto which cultural fantasies, desires, fears, anxieties, hopes, and utopias are projected."[184] Second Life society tries to mask its fear of the female avatar body through these rituals by enforcing a performance of femininity projected onto the female resident through the ceremony. After spending days and sometimes weeks in preparation for the event as well as a significant number of Linden dollars, avatars are locked into the performance of the gender they have chosen. The ritual demands commitment from its participants, and following the ceremony, those same avatars would throw away the cultural and social capital accrued through the ritual if they stepped away from the gendered performance dictated by the ceremony.

Going to a wedding planner for advice strengthens the cultural and social commitment. Wedding planners offer complete wedding packages for much less money than it would cost to purchase all of the cultural items necessary for the wedding. For my

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[184] Kay Schaffer, "The Contested Zone: Cybernetics, Feminism, and Representation," *Journal of Australian Studies* 20, no. 50-1 (1996): 157-64.

case studies, I contacted wedding planners to arrange to observe weddings, and I watched weddings at five separate wedding venues as well as two ceremonies that took place at locations other than those sims set aside specifically for weddings. In each wedding, the wedding planner asks the couple to make certain decisions about the ceremony. One planner, for example, told me how she feels it is extremely important to coach a couple through their vows. "They may not know what to say," *Angel Damask* told me, "But they really have to think about it. They can't just arrive and talk. It's a special day." *Angel* is essentially suggesting that the couple must commit to writing vows that demonstrate their level of commitment to the performance of a gendered relationship. The words are not heartfelt, spontaneous declarations of love but carefully worded declarations that wedding planners help to craft. This wedding planner may not realize the cultural constraints she's placing on the couple, but the necessity for the vows to be perfect makes it clear to the engaged couple that they are signing up for a significant commitment. Society's need for the commitment is hidden by habitus, but wedding planners press the importance of the vows to newly engaged couples. Of the twenty weddings I observed, fifteen had custom-written vows that emphasized gendered roles in the relationships. Grooms promised protection while brides promised to nurture their mates.

In the vows, male avatars promised to make women happy and often used imagery that demonstrated protection and strength. Below are three examples:

> [12:26] Wotan Wolf: Silver. I love you with all my heart, I promise and swear I will do everything in my power to make you happy for as long as you will have me. I will be there for you as your husband, your wolf, your

friend. Threw everything. May the gods watch over us in our happiness. I love you so much.

[13:22] Sam Constantine: My Dearest Kyleigh

Today, in front of all these people here present I pledge my life to you, and will do everything within my power to ensure that you want for very little and that I may make you a happy and contented woman.

You are the world, the sea, the stars, in fact everything to me and I would be the happiest man alive if you would be my wife - the most beloved of all women.

[05:29 PM] Blaser Xue: On this our day I Promise to you that I will always be loving, caring, and supportive to the best of my ability and that I will try to be a true life partner, working with you so that we each may grow as individuals and as a couple.

Within these vows, the male residents make statements that contribute to their gendered performance. *Wotan* uses not only his last name but the imagery of the wolf as a means of showing himself to be strong in contrast to his blushing bride, *silverwhite*. *Sam* promises that he will make his bride, *Smalantha*, "a happy and contented woman," suggesting that he will be her support and protector. *Blaser* also promises to support his bride, *SunsetSky*, but he also suggests he wants to continue growing as an individual, highlighting the independence of the male body.

In contrast, the brides show a much more nurturing, dependent quality to their vows:

[12:26] silverwhite: Wotan, you aremy love, my wolf, my world, my everthing, I will love you and take care of you wih every beat of my heart. From this day forward we will be one heart, one soul, I will love you through life and beyond. There are no limits to how far we can go. I loveyou with all my heart and soul..

[13:23] Smalanth: (MY DARLING SAM),....... I promise to love and care for you and I will try in every way to be worthy of your love

[05:31 PM] SunsetSky Magic: You gave me a reason to smile again, a warm hand to hold, a soft kiss on the cheek, You gave me my best friend, one that would be with me forever and a day.. A partner to say good morning to, one to say good night with, You gave me peace of mind, made my spirit smile. But most of all you gave me the freedom I needed to find out just how much you had become my everything.

silverwhite starts by referencing the strength of her husband with the wolf imagery then promises to take care of him with "every beat of my heart." *Smalanth* similarly promises to care for *Sam*, adding that she hopes her efforts will make her, seemingly the weaker vessel, worthy of this avatar's love. *SunsetSky* focuses on feelings and emotions typically associated with a feminine performance before saying that *Blaser* was her "everything." Her own identity is swallowed up in being his wife.

The cultural importance of the vows is compounded by the social commitment required to perform them. Weddings are large, lavish parties, and friends of the couple came out to celebrate in all of the weddings I observed. The couple makes the cultural and economic commitments with the understanding that they will perform in front of

their friends. Each couple performs their gendered roles as bride/groom, groom/groom, or bride/bride to a company of people with whom they have relationships. Recalling the desire to avoid deception in relationships, this performance demonstrates a couple's willingness to perform gender with their group of friends as witnesses. The vows become declarations of this gendered performance.

The warranting process allows an avatar higher social status inworld. Married avatars are considered more reliable and less prone to deception. Marriage and its high warranting becomes a part of a social hierarchy. Bourdieu suggests that marriage is a strategy to move up in the social world. Beauty and purity, for example, hold a high value in traditional first-life marriage, and those attributes can be exchanged for a social position higher than the bride's original status.[185] First-life marriages, therefore, become a marketplace where strategic exchanges of capital can result in movement through various stratifications of society. To play the marriage game well, a bride or groom must pick the best hand possible given her or his position. A penniless servant girl like Cinderella, for example, would play her best hand by marrying a prince.[186] Her reward is to marry into the highest level of society. The game, Bourdieu asserts, is a part of habitus. Society plays the marriage game without realizing that such exchanges are taking place. The best

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[185] Pierre Bourdieu, "Marriage Strategies as Strategies of Social Reproduction," in *Family and Society: Selections from the Annales*, eds. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 117-144.

[186] Pierre Lamaison and Pierre Bourdieu, "From Rules to Strategies: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu," *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no.1 (1986): 110-120.

players will simply step into the roles assigned to them by society and take the most appropriate steps to achieve their goals, rather the way in which the best baseball players always seem to catch the ball. In marriage, the best players see the opportunity for strategic advancement and act upon those openings.

Second Life marriage is a game similar to first life, but the rules are somewhat different. When an avatar goes through a high warranting ritual, she gains a measure of social prestige, and marrying can be a way of increasing other forms of capital. Society rewards residents who agree to legible positions on the grid with higher cultural, social, and economic status. When *Valaryia Devinna* married *Falcon Boa*, the marriage boosted her business. *Falcon* freely uses voice and posts photos of his first-life self enjoying his beloved motorcycles. *Valaryia*, on the other hand, displays no warranting activity. In their wedding, *Valaryia* performed the role of the bride, finishing weeks of a committed performance of planning the wedding as the bride, a feminine performance. During and subsequent to her marriage, *Valaryia*'s business, Solitaire, a BDSM clothing and accessories store, went from occupying a single sim to three sims in total. She heavily advertised her marriage in the Solitaire group dedicated to her store's sales. Bourdieu states that the direct connection between increased economic success and increased social and cultural capital can't always be traced, but economic capital often feeds on these connections.[187] I would add that *Valaryia*'s agreement to be governed by the economic, social, and cultural forces within the marriage ceremony led to her ability to command

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[187] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, ed. John G. Richardson (NewYork; Greenwood, 1986), 247.

higher capital in society. She raised her social capital by marrying a warranted male avatar in a high-bandwidth activity. That act brought her increased traffic and esteem for her work, raising her cultural capital. She gained economic success through warranting. In a society that dislikes deception, going through a ritual like marriage allows a resident to enter into a higher class because that resident has agreed to remain positioned on the societal grid based on her performance.

Weddings offer a multitude of ways for residents to perform gender for an audience waiting to legitimize the actions and reify the gendered performances. In the following case study, residents accept gender as the invisible force driving the marriage ritual. The couple epitomizes the perfected gendered performance of marriage. Both *Sky* and *Blaser* step into the ritual with the intention of performing the roles of "bride" and "groom" perfectly. They invest heavily in the performance, and their circle of friends rewards them with high levels of social and cultural capital following the successful performance.

SunsetSky Magic and Blaser Xue

"You are cordially invited to the wedding of *SunsetSky Magic* and *Blaser Xue*."[188] In Second Life, these two names spoke volumes about the upcoming event. *SunsetSky* was one of the original mentors in Second Life, a group of people who would greet new avatars in the early days of the world. The mentors worked closely with the early Lindens, and there were rumors that official company representatives might appear at the event. *Blaser* had his own digerati reputation. He builds some of the most expensive and

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[188] *SunsetSky Blaser*, Wedding Invitation, given inworld July 2, 2013.

intricate homes and businesses in Second Life. On top of that, *Blaser* is a singer, a

crooner whose occasional concerts elicit sighs of pleasure from the women in the

audience. If you ever wondered what it was like to sit in the audience of a Frank Sinatra

concert and see the reaction of the women in the audience, going to a *Blaser* concert

gives you a very good idea.

If the two names on the invitation made it clear this wedding would be the social

event of the year, the look of the invitation emphasized that one of the most talented

builders in Second Life had had a hand in its creation. A particle script in the invitation

shot hearts out in several directions, leaving them at last to fall and bounce about on the

floor before disappearing. The Hallelujah Chorus played as the object appeared on the

ground. Miniature pictures of *SunsetSky* and *Blaser* appeared in the center of a carefully

arranged collection of tree branches. This object had taken time and talent. In first-life

terms, imagine a moving truck arriving at your house with an eight-foot bouquet that

spits out pictures of the couple all over your lawn like an autumn tree dropping its leaves.

The invitation was nothing if not a grand, over-the-top spectacle, a suitable investment of

cultural capital for the ritual.

SunsetSky and Blaser invested a lot of their social capital in extending the

invitations, and the time it took to craft the invitation worked as part of the economic

currency they dedicated to the performance. *Sky* and *Blaser* have an enormous circle of

friends, and they invested all of their social capital in the performance. Their decision

even tested the limits of Second Life. Second Life servers can only handle thirty-six

people on a sim at any one time, limiting how many people could attend the actual

ceremony. The Lindens raised the cap for the number of avatars allowed on the land to

include the maximum fifty instead of thirty-six. *Sky* felt obligated to invite Legion Linden, the man responsible for the program shift. Having a Linden at the wedding was not just a social obligation: the invitation and his subsequent attendance gave the wedding the institutional capital of being officially blessed by Linden Labs. Despite the increased number of attendees, the couple still had other friends who needed to attend. The invitations, therefore, were tiered. I had the highest-tier invitation, the ability to attend both the wedding and the reception of my choice, including the primary reception venue. Because of the number of people wishing to be a part of *SunsetSky* and *Blaser*'s special day, multiple receptions would be given on a total of four sims, with the bride and groom teleporting from place to place at various intervals. In each of the weddings I observed, the couple invited as many of their social circle as possible, but *Sky* and *Blaser* clearly had the largest number of guests of any I attended.

The couple and their guests also invested a significant amount of cultural capital. Chatter in several groups ahead of the big day focused on what to wear to both the ceremony and the large reception. Top designers were mentioned, and one designer even created a gown in honor of the couple that guests could pick up at her store for free. *Blaser* built an entire wedding venue for the big day, complete with a fully designed and manicured English garden, a wedding gazebo, and an ethereal dance floor for the primary reception area. Rather than investing economic capital in acquiring acceptable wedding items, *Blaser* and the guests built these items from scratch, which represents a more significant investment. The objects themselves had to adhere to the gendered norms for the ceremony, demonstrating *Blaser*'s understanding of the culture and his commitment to those regulations. The couple invested a lot in the ritual, but the goal was not to

solidify a gendered grid position but to have a romantic, joyous celebration. The ritual masks the investment with this positive emotion surrounding the ceremony.

I met *SunsetSky* on one of my first logins to the virtual world, and we had been friends for years. My invitation was earned through social interaction, not just my position as a researcher. In fact, about thirty minutes ahead of the ceremony, I sent *Sky* a private message, congratulating her on the big event. We chatted about how nervous she was, how she had been looking forward to the day, and her stress over whether *Blaser* had thought of all the details. *Sky* fretted that every little thing hadn't quite been done perfectly. "Not like my RL wedding," she laughed. She worried about her dress, whether guests were having fun, and whether *Blaser* had built a "romantic enough" venue. *Sky* was worrying about the elements of her investment. She was concerned about her dress and whether it was pretty and feminine enough. She was anxious that guests were appreciating and getting pleasure from the social and cultural capital she had invested. Most of all, she wondered if the *Blaser* had invested enough cultural capital in the venue to create the appropriate atmosphere for the ceremony. *Sky* felt pressure to adhere to the ritual perfectly.

As noted, the wedding followed the five steps essential for every marriage ritual in Second Life. At the beginning of *Sky* and *Blaser*'s wedding, a solid twenty minutes of people chatting and saying hello preceded the bride's entrance. Builders, singers, fashion designers, and Lindens said hello to each person present in the space in open chat, a continually scrolling screen of greetings among pairs of avatars. When I arrived, for example, there were around forty avatars to say hello to, requiring one to two lines of text each from me followed by their own lines of dialogue in return. Social capital is

exchanged through these greetings, and at this wedding of the year, it was important to recognize each person as a way of publicly establishing a relationship, borrowing on each other's cultural and social capital.

When *Sky* appeared at the entrance to the venue, however, all greetings ceased. After a few initial comments about how lovely *Sky* was in her wedding dress, a huge ballroom confection with an enormous train, all conversation ceased. This cessation of conversation was common at this point in the weddings. In fact, at one wedding venue, the benches guests used were programmed to have everyone stand once the bride arrived. This animation was controlled by the officiant, so guests were surprised when they suddenly stood. The motion jolted the guests from being in control of the conversation to giving the control to the officiant. The officiant took over control at this point in the ceremony in thirteen of the weddings I witnessed.

Like ninety percent of the weddings I observed, this wedding had an officiant other than a white male.[189] *Rose Illyrian*, a female builder who is considered a highly creative wedding planner, conducted the ceremony. While most officiants in first life gain their authority from a religious or civic organization, Second Life officiants draw on their

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[189] While I say that 90%, or 18 of the 20 weddings I observed, had an officiant other than a white male, it should be noted that one of the white male officiants was actually a normally female avatar that had been asked to be a male officiant to resemble the bride's first-life pastor. I'm counting the performance as that of a white male because the intention behind that avatar's body and skin was chosen for its symbolic properties by the bride, not the officiant herself.

own reputation as cultural arbitrators of taste as the basis for their ability to authorize

weddings. In *Rose*'s case, her work as a wedding planner is known as some of the best in

the world, so her opening words carried the weight of her cultural capital as the means to

join *Sky* and *Blaser* together.

> [05:23 PM] Rose Illyrian: We have been invited here on this beautiful day
> to share with Blaser Xue and SunsetSky Magic a very important moment
> in their lives.
>
> [05:23 PM] Rose Illyrian: In the months they have been together, their
> love and understanding of each other has grown and matured, and they
> have chosen to live their lives together in marriage.
>
> [05:23 PM] Rose Illyrian: In speaking a few weeks ago with Sky and
> Blaser about their marriage plans, I was struck by the obvious love,
> respect and appreciation they have for one another, and by the playfulness
> between them.
>
> [05:24 PM] Rose Illyrian: In fact I think this is the most quiet I've heard
> Blaser since I met him :)

In these opening lines, *Rose* suggests the importance of the day and the event, yet from a

user perspective, such claims seem ridiculous. Second Life is a transient world. Avatars

disappear from the world frequently without consequences at any time. In fact, *Sky*'s

previous partner, *Rex*, simply decided he could no longer devote time to Second Life,

sent *Sky* a note saying he was sorry, and deleted his account. *Rose*'s words avoid

highlighting the instability of virtual relationships, instead talking about the intimate

qualities of *Sky* and *Blaser*'s relationship: love, respect, and appreciation. By using these

words, *Rose* veiled the gendered qualities of what was about to take place. The guests

stood in agreement with her. Where in first life such acquiescence is generally signaled

solely by a guest's presence at a ceremony, in virtual worlds, talking and emoting is

encouraged throughout the ceremony, almost a kind of call and response to the events

unfolding.

> [05:25 PM] Rose Illyrian: And so I would like to begin today with a
>
> reading from A.A. Milne, because it makes me think of them.
>
> [05:25 PM] Rose Illyrian: "A soul mate is someone who has locks that fit
>
> our keys, and keys to fit our locks.
>
> [05:25 PM] Rose Illyrian: When we feel safe enough to open the locks,
>
> our truest selves step out and we can be completely and honestly who we
>
> are.
>
> [05:25 PM] SunsetSky Magic: tears
>
> [05:26 PM] tt collins: awww
>
> [05:26 PM] Fuschia Parx: :)
>
> [05:26 PM] Bubbly Kidd: awwwww
>
> [05:26 PM] Tinyallthat Young: awwww
>
> [05:26 PM] Rose Illyrian: We can be loved for who we are and not who
>
> we're pretending to be.
>
> [05:26 PM] Cheetach Lavender: very true
>
> [05:26 PM] Rose Illyrian: Each unveils the best part of the other.
>
> [05:26 PM] Bridget Jennings: (so beautiful)
>
> [05:26 PM] Frillylove Benelli: *nods

In this example, wedding guests commented on and lent emotion to the ceremony. Their emotion gave approval to what *Rose* said throughout the ceremony, which in turn solidified the new position *Sky* and *Blaser* would occupy within that community. If they performed correctly, as in when *Sky* teared up in the previous example, the community verbally responded with their own emotive textual performance. The call-and-response style of weddings allows the guests the chance to approve or disapprove of the bride and groom's actions as the action happens.

Many of the guests would interject words of encouragement for the bride and groom, telling *Sky* how beautiful she looked or telling *Blaser* what a lucky man he was. These interjections continually labeled *Sky* the "bride" and *Blaser* the "groom," gendered roles that indicated these avatars were performing a heterosexual relationship. On the positional grid, society places *Sky* in the heterosexual woman position, and her performance as a bride reinforced that position. Placed in the heterosexual couple grid position, the couple performed their roles as dictated by the ritual: *Sky* arriving in feminine gown, *Blaser* waiting in a formal tuxedo, and with guests surrounding them ready to observe their performance. By attaching the label of heterosexual couple during a wedding, Second Life society is essentially blessing the gendered performance of the couple, giving the blessing not to the union of the two performers but to their demonstration of the cultural display of femininity and masculinity. The avatar body could at any point reveal a deception, but the performer would lose the amount of capital invested in the ceremony if such a revelation occurred. If the performers make it through the ceremony with no surprises, the group assembled figuratively sighs in relief that the two performers won't be creating discord in the world by revealing a deception.

Movement between grid positions creates chaos, and society longs for the stasis of solid, grid-positioned performances. In effect, it solidifies the gender binary by asking avatars to perform specific female and male actions in order to receive the blessing of friends and, through their approval, society.

Nowhere is the presence of first-life gender indicators more sought after than during the vows section of the ceremony. Weddings emphasize the transience of the virtual world in the way they promise forever in the vows. There's a compressed sense of time, since a day in Second Life only lasts four hours. Relationships are sometimes nothing more than hour-long relationships. Second Life partnerships aren't meant to last. When couples last more than a few months, people begin to speak about the "old married couple" that they have become. Since relationships come and go, there's a sense of playfulness in the couplings.

Marriages of animals, same-sex couples, and even genderless couples are perfectly fine when it's clear that the participants are aware of their own avatar parody (by revealing their first-life gender markers to each other) and are willing to perform gendered animations and roles according to how the virtual world dictates them. Someone, in other words, has to be on the pink poseball during the wedding, and if it's done well, the avatar should be the one with the most feminine role in first life. The officiant is there as the symbol of the society wishing to prevent deception. If the animations and gender roles are followed properly, the officiant pronounces the wedding complete, and the couple can kiss and complete the ceremony. Following *Sky* and *Blaser*'s vows, for example, *Rose* said:

[05:46 PM] Rose Illyrian: And so now, inasmuch as you, *Blaser*, and you,

Sky, have announced the truths that are already written in your hearts, and

have witnessed the same in the presence of these, your family and friends

[05:46 PM] Rose Illyrian: We observe joyfully that you are now husband

and wife.

Of all the officiants I observed, *Rose*'s words fit Second Life most effectively. She has no

authority to pronounce *Sky* and *Blaser* married, since no laws exist that could give her

that power. By giving the authority to the whole group, she is giving the blessing of their

gendered union to Second Life as a whole, and the guests can respond with their

approval.

As *Blaser* and *Sky* kissed after *Rose*'s pronouncement, the guests exploded into

five minutes of continuous congratulations. The kiss was held for the full five minutes

until the congratulations died down, and in the majority of the weddings I observed, the

couple held the kiss until these approving messages were delivered. One minute of *Sky*

and *Blaser*'s congratulatory period shows how much social capital is reinvested in the

couple following the end of the ritual:

[05:46 PM] Bubbly Kidd: grins broadly

[05:46 PM] SunsetSky Magic: smile

[05:46 PM] Sally Redenblack: YAY!

[05:46 PM] Miles Caerndow: (,,.•´ ¯¨•.,,`•** (•.•)  **•´ ,,.•¨¯`•.,,)

[05:46 PM] Miles Caerndow: (¨*•.¸´•. ::Applause :: ¸.•´¸.•*¨)

[05:46 PM] Miles Caerndow: (,,.•´ ¯¨**Clapping**¨¯`•.,,)

[05:46 PM] Miles Caerndow: (,,.•´ ¯¨•.,,`•** (•.•)  **•´ ,,.•¨¯`•.,,)

[05:46 PM] Cecilia Galaxy: APPLAUSE APPLAUSE

[05:46 PM] Derek Rau: yay

[05:46 PM] Jillian Hax: YAY!

[05:46 PM] Violet Bowenford: ♥CONGRATULATIONS♥

[05:46 PM] Violet Bowenford: ♥♥♥ ⊱✿◖＿◗✿⊰ ♥♥♥

[05:46 PM] Violet Bowenford: ♥♥♥To the Happy Couple♥♥♥

[05:46 PM] Fuschia Parx: :D

[05:46 PM] Cattish Myoo: *~*~* APPLAUSE !!! *~*~*

[05:46 PM] Cattish Myoo: ~*~*~* APPLAUSE !!!! *~*~*~

[05:46 PM] FivenRye Free: MAZELTOV!!!!!!!

[05:46 PM] Lee Writer claps

[05:46 PM] Cheetah Dirkle: Yay!

[05:46 PM] Cheetach Lavender: *** APPLAUDS ***

[05:46 PM] Derek Rau ☆˝)

[05:46 PM] Derek Rau ¸.•´ ¸.•*´¨) ☆.(̄`•.•´ ̄)

[05:46 PM] Derek Rau (.¸.•´ (¸.•` ☆¤°.`•¸.•´ ☆ ♪ ♫ Applauds!! ♫ ♪

¸.•*¨)☆°☆

[05:46 PM] Bubbly Kidd: ¸.•´¸.•*¨) ¸.•*¨) (`'·.¸(`'·.¸ ¸.·'´) ¸.·'´) (¨*•.¸

(¨*•.¸`•.¸

[05:46 PM] Bubbly Kidd: (¸.•´ (¸.•´.•´ ¸¸.•˙¨ ̄`•APPLAUSE! •`¯¨• ¸¸ `•.

`•.¸) `•.¸)

[05:46 PM] Bubbly Kidd: (¸¸.•´¯¨•.¸¸`•** (•.•) **•´ ¸¸.•˙¨ ̄`•.¸¸)

[05:46 PM] Jillian Hax: (¸¸.•´¯¨•.¸¸ Applause ¸¸.•˙¨ ̄`•.¸¸)

[05:46 PM] Fuschia Parx: yay

[05:46 PM] Marcy Wilson: That surely was lovely

[05:46 PM] Jim Linden: Woohoo!

[05:46 PM] Mae Noel: wonderful!

[05:46 PM] Sue Writer: HAPPY DAY!!!!!

[05:46 PM] Derek Rau ¸.•´ ¸.•*´¨) ☆.(¯`•.•´¯)

[05:46 PM] Derek Rau (.¸.•´ (¸.•` ☆¤°.`•.¸.•´ ☆ ♪ ♫ Applauds!! ♫ ♪

¸.•*¨)☆°☆

[05:46 PM] Fuschia Parx: ♥..•°•..♥..•°•..♥ APPLAUSE ♥..•°•..♥..•°•..♥

[05:46 PM] Frillylove Benelli: *clapping

[05:46 PM] Kristin Aboma: ~~~*APPLAUSE*~~~

[05:46 PM] Cecilia Galaxy: ****APPLAUSE*******

Every guest felt the need to give his or her approval, and in the five minutes of

congratulations, every person wrote something in open chat. This action demonstrates

that the guests are willing to praise the couple and give them the social capital associated

with friendship.

This approval continues into the final stage of the wedding ceremony, the

reception. Immediately following the five minutes of congratulatory exclamations, *Sky*

and *Blaser* invited their guests to wander through the constructed English garden to the

elaborate marble pavilion designed for the primary reception. This particular wedding

was unusual because *Blaser* sang at the wedding, demonstrating his gender yet again. By

using the voice feature, *Blaser* warranted his male, heterosexual avatar performance with

an accompanying biological male voice. Though users in early discussions of gender in

Second Life reminded each other over and over how voice could be faked through

computer programs or substitutes standing in as the avatar, when voice was introduced in 2007, the tool was considered the way to determine if another avatar was telling the truth about his gender. There were even rumors that if you didn't sound "male enough" or "female enough" in voice, Linden Labs would cancel your account for violating the terms of service.[190] In one interview I conducted, the couple went into voice after I asked them if they had used voice with each other before their ceremony. *BillyBob Boggins*, the husband, started by saying, "I don't want you to think I'm a woman." Despite the fact that it would be very easy to fake *BillyBob*'s voice through computer manipulation, he felt it necessary to satisfy the question by giving me a biological marker of his gender. *Blaser*'s performance garnered praise and the usual adulation of the women of the group, and guests praised *Sky* for her good taste in picking her new husband. What the guests were really praising was *Blaser*'s gendered performance as a singer and a solidly positioned resident of the world.

Once the couple has demonstrated a static, gendered grid position by adhering to the ritual, guests give their approval and show the return on the couple's investment of social capital. The officiant observes the ceremony on behalf of society and holds control over the performance, effectively holding the couple's investment of social and cultural capital until the end of the ritual. The audience remains silent, observing whether the couple performs appropriately in their chosen gender roles. At its completion, the guests demonstrate their acceptance of the gendered performance with celebration, one that not

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[190] "Police Blotter: Gender Made Public," Second Life Forum Archives, July 17, 2007, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/4a/198233/1.html.

only congratulates the couple but society as well for yet another successful positioning of avatars on the gendered grid.

Marriage Movement: Transgression in the Ritual

Second Life society has bound the performance of gender within intimate relationships through the construction and repetition of the marriage ritual. Society designed the marriage ritual to bind performers to gender. Weddings such as *Sky* and *Blaser*'s repeat the socially-approved version of the ritual, and in doing so, ritual performers perpetuate what society believes is the correct performance of gender. Repetition leads to stasis on the grid, and since movement can appear chaotic, society wants residents to feel the inevitable pull towards stability. Marriage masks other potentials and makes it appear that they no longer exist. Gendered positions appear to be the norm.

The two case studies in this chapter are performances where gender is revealed and critiqued by using the same conventions as a typical wedding. In the first, *Chevy* and *Barella* use the same regulatory strands present in the socially acceptable ceremony with the hope of being able to commit to a gendered resident role while still revealing a gender-switching user. The second case study features a much different scenario, a playful avatar hopping across the gender binary, highlighting the many ways the animations and objects in Second Life regulate the gendered performance. Just as most of the brides I witnessed stepped into the bride's animations, clothing themselves as the beauty dressed in white, *Slag Loon* happily takes on many of the animations and gendered object of the bride, but *Slag* also takes on male gendering, making it impossible to place him on the social matrix inworld. *Slag*'s performance makes it unclear whether

the pink or the blue poseball is appropriate. The contrast between these two case studies illustrates how difficult it can be to escape gender once a couple enters into the marriage ritual.

Chevy Bravin and Barella

Virtual society spent years crafting a marriage ritual that requires the kind of intense commitment that can regulate and stabilize gendered performance. *Chevy Bravin*, a tall, beautiful female resident, had already been through a wedding ceremony in a previous virtual relationship. She was aware of the commitment and the effort needed to pull off this ritual, and she prepared to go into her wedding with *Barella* as a female avatar yet again. *Chevy* had decided that this time through the ritual would be different. She was going to reveal her user's biological body within her gendered performance as a bride.

Chevy and *Barella* wanted the privacy of the clouds for their ceremony. When I arrived, a security orb greeted me in open chat. "Hello, *Airtsela Charisma*," it typed after finding my name on its list, "Welcome to *Chevy* and *Barella*'s wedding!!" At 2,000 meters above the virtual ground, each landowner can parcel out the sky as though it were a different piece of land. Each parcel can have its own security, so, for example, you could keep a shopping mall on the ground below and keep your home in the sky free from prying, nosy visitors. If an avatar isn't on the accepted list, she is booted from the land or sky, teleported back to her home position against her will. I was vetted and allowed to be here. This wedding wasn't taking place in a specific wedding venue, but on *Chevy*'s own sim. She set the wedding list to eject anyone who might wish to make trouble during the day.

There was good reason for the security. When I first learned of this wedding, *Angel Damask*, a wedding planner in SL and a good friend and confidant of the couple, told me that the tenants of Chateau de la Rose, one of the largest and most popular BDSM areas in Second Life and *Chevy*'s personally built business sim, were abuzz with the news that *Chevy* might reveal her first-life user self at the wedding.[191] People declined the invitation, tried to talk her out of the wedding, and even threatened to leave the Chateau, taking their membership dues with them. Each sim in Second Life costs $376 US per month to run, so having tenants threatening to abandon her, along with their monthly rent going toward that tier, meant that *Chevy* was committing significant social and economic capital into this ceremony.

As the world around me rezzed, I found myself outside a primitive, Stonehenge-like structure, three nested circles of large stones. *Chevy*'s hand was outstretched, putting the final stone in place. She greeted us, but there were spelling errors in the first three sentences she typed. She desperately tried to correct them, laughing at her mistakes. *Angel*, who had arrived before I had, said, "Relax honey, we're here for the long haul." *Chevy*'s typing problems continued throughout the day, accompanied with continual apologies for her unusual ineptitude. There were also long pauses and fits and starts of sentences. In the Second Life viewer, you can see when an avatar is typing before the text appears in chat. *Chevy* would start typing, stop, then start again throughout the three-hour

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[191] While *Angel* is a wedding planner, *Chevy* consulted *Miss Falann*, the officiant and wedding planner for this ceremony.

ceremony and reception. This hesitation signaled anyone watching the chat window that she was thinking carefully about every word she said.

The guests stood in silence while we waited for everyone to arrive. This wedding was one of only two I witnessed where the guests didn't engage in lively conversation. While it was clear the guests at *Chevy* and *Barella*'s wedding knew each other well, the conversation didn't flow as easily as it did at other weddings. The greetings were warm, but after the initial conversation, the guests reverted to silence. The avatars paced in the small area, occasionally speaking, but mostly remaining silent. For a group of friends to stay quiet is a feat in Second Life. *Angel* told me she had spoken to everyone in the room at some point over the previous days, and everyone was aware of the disapproval surrounding what *Chevy* had planned.

The ceremony was supposed to start at noon, but it was almost twenty minutes before *Chevy* felt ready to begin the first part of the marriage ritual. *Chevy* appeared to control the timing throughout the ceremony, only giving up that control later in the day to the officiant. *Barella* arrived a touch later than noon, appearing first as a cloud, her body slowly appearing from the mist. No words were spoken in open chat. Her wedding gown, a frothy concoction of frills and bows, began rezzing piece by piece. No one moved until she appeared completely. She said hello to those assembled, then quickly made her way into the stone circle standing next to the landing area.

Chevy invited the guests to join them in the inner circle of the stones that stood beside us. Huge, tall boulders in three rings protected the inner field from view, and once I made my way around the edge of the final circle, a platform with two poles on opposite sides appeared before me. The platform had a smaller, green marble circle on top of it,

directly in the middle of the two poles. Red and white curtains surrounding the platform fluttered in the breeze as the guests gathered around. A steel ring on the top of each pole glistened in the sunlight.

Chevy sashayed into the circle, her animation overrider making it appear that she was far more confident and self-assured than her hesitant typing suggested. There was a distinct disconnection between her avatar's animations, strong and controlled, and her manner of textual performance. Her motions appeared calm, but the typing showed those of us present that what was happening behind the screen was very different. *Chevy* was showing signs of committing to a gendered performance. She was dressed in a long black silk gown clinging to her tall, voluptuous avatar body. The fabric dropped in the back to expose her skin all the way to her buttocks, and in the front, the gown barely glanced over her chest, exposing both front and side cleavage of her breasts. Every curve of her female body was heightened and accentuated with the dress, but there were no frills, bows, or any overtly feminine accents. In contrast, *Barella* was covered in bows, ties, and ribbons. Her white dress consisted of a tightly laced corset with pink bows down the front, around the shoulders, and down the back with a billowing, lacey skirt. The dress seemed almost a throwback to the eighteenth century French court gowns, a stark contrast to the very modern, clean lines of *Chevy*'s dress. These two avatars, however, could clearly be read as female from their choice of animations, body shapes, and clothing. Without the prior warning that this wedding had a surprise in store, most residents would have seen this wedding as a regular and uneventful. The two brides were choosing to invest economic and social capital in their feminine performance.

The day was planned to have two ceremonies: a BDSM piercing ceremony as well as a traditional wedding with an officiant present. The stage for the piercing lay inside the stone structure *Chevy* asked us to enter. As the ceremony began, *Barella* moved immediately to the platform and began taking off her dress, but *Chevy* stopped her. "One moment before we proceed to the pole," she said," I have somethigns to say to *Barella* in ront of everyone here." *Chevy* then started typing, hesitated, then stopped. A full two minutes of silence fell on the guests, an eternity in Second Life where social interaction is king. The guests stayed silent, waiting for *Chevy*'s explanation. Finally:

> [12:19] Chevy Bravin: Barella has worn my collar for over 1 and 1/2 yers will be 2 years come thisw December
>
> [12:19] Chevy Bravin: years*
>
> [12:20] Chevy Bravin: ((a bit nervous heeh))

A minute passed in silence before *Chevy* continued. The stuttering typing continued, and at one point, she paced around the edge of the stone circle before returning to where *Barella* stood on the platform. It seemed as though she was coming to some decision about what to say and how to say it.

> [12:22] Chevy Bravin: Through this time she and I have both grown . I must admit I have grown more .
>
> [12:22] Chevy Bravin: in that I needed to have grown more
>
> [12:22] Chevy Bravin: than the past .
>
> [12:23] Chevy Bravin: I accepted Barella as my slave back then because she was in a situation with a Master who ignored her and she need ed some one who would give her the attention she deserves.. The love

[12:23] Barella Bravin blushes

Another silence descended, but this time, *Chevy* was not typing. She moved next to *Barella* and stood in silence. She started to type at times, then would stop for a moment, only to start again.

[12:25] Chevy Bravin: I gave her a diamaond choker that I made into a collar because liek her diamonds are vorever and they are fragile as well so I must keep that in mind and make sure to love an dprotect her that is what I promise to my girl. My love.

[12:26] Chevy Bravin: together we have come up with our own unique ceremony

[12:27] Chevy Bravin: no ta usual ceremony of roses

[12:28] Chevy Bravin: but like a rose we do hurt and and are eautifull at the same time.

[12:28] Chevy Bravin: beautiful*

[12:28] Chevy Bravin: Barella has helped me through some hurt

[12:28] Chevy Bravin: to trust in others again

Chevy indicated a deep commitment to her relationship in this speech, and if the wedding ceremony was only about the dedication to romance, the guests' uneasiness would have been relieved. Marriage, however, asks for a committed performance of gender throughout the ceremony, so *Chevy* would have to continue this performance for the rest of the ritual.

After the final burst of this speech, *Chevy* invited *Barella* to stand on the platform between the poles. Once *Barella* was bound, *Chevy* stepped to the platform and began the piercing ceremony.

[12:34] Chevy Bravin looks proudly to her love as she is displayed.

[12:35] Chevy Bravin: As in Story of O teh slave O wsa asked to be pireced with labia rings a whole set of them our version will will be only one clit ring .

[12:36] Chevy Bravin: Will you wear the clit ring my love and girl

[12:37] Barella Bravin: I beg you my love to set this clit ring on me so I will be linked to you all my life. Barella Bravin arches her body and presents herself as she bites her lipswaiting for the sting in the most sensiitive part of her body.

[12:38] Chevy Bravin approaches my girl and knels down on one knee takes the garter and detacehs it from the stockings

[12:39] Chevy Bravin: removes itand pulls down my girl's panties

[12:40] Chevy Bravin: takes ou tth eclit ring and places it on to my girl's clit

[12:41] Barella Bravin makes a face as an moans as she feels the sting in her flesh, the delicate hand of her love setting the ring on her.

[12:43] Barella Bravin: Thank you my love. May this ring be chained to you forever. And may I deserve it all my life with you.

[12:44] Chevy Bravin invites the guests to view her belove'ds new rin

One thing to notice in the above ceremony is the time in between each action. A minute passes between each sentence. Most couples have prepared statements that are copied and pasted into the chat window to speed up the ceremony. Rarely would a single line of text be typed each minute, and none of the other weddings I attended had drawn-out periods of dialogue. The two women conducted the ceremony at a very different pace from the other weddings that I witnessed in Second Life. Animations at wedding chapels are quick, and the wedding planner is either asking that the wedding participants jump into animations or actually moving them on to the next step in the ceremony via a device that controls the couple's animations. *Chevy* and *Barella* thoughtfully plotted their way through this part of the performance, highlighting the intentionality of their performance. No one was there to suggest the next step. They alone determined the timing of the ritual. *Chevy*'s invitation to view the ring at the end of the ceremony also drew the audience into the ceremony. The guests were not eavesdroppers, but instead, they were asked to actively participate, and time was set aside for them to do so.

That aspect of the ceremony asked for a social commitment from the assembled guests. In the Second Life viewer, users can opt to see where other avatars are looking, and at this point in the ceremony, I tracked the views of the other guests. *Chevy* wasn't asking the guests to move toward *Barella*, but rather to use Second Life's ability to manipulate the camera control to zoom in or out on objects, meaning that the avatars stood still while their controls were used to focus on *Barella*'s clitoris. A small dot appeared on my screen labeled for each person present, and the dots move about the screen to indicate what each person was looking at. While most of the guests joined me in viewing the newly pierced *Barella*, three did not. It is possible that the users were away

from the controls or were occupied with other tasks, since their camera movements didn't

change during the viewing. It is also possible that they were uncomfortable with the clit

piercing, though given the nature of the BDSM community to which *Chevy* and *Barella*

belong, this option seems unlikely. It is possible, however, that they actively refused to

participate. Each of those avatars moved with the rest of us to the next ceremony within

seconds of the viewing, so they were presumably at their keyboards when they had been

asked to participate. Their cameras did not move. They chose to remain stationary. Rather

than investing social capital by agreeing to participate, these avatars remained passive.

Following the piercing ceremony, the guests were invited to travel across a bridge

to a small island floating above the clouds. The decorations were sparse, yet it was clear

that the wedding that would follow would be more along the lines of a traditional Second

Life wedding. Instead of a Stonehenge-like structure, the area had stands with white

flower arrangements, ribbons, and an arch to walk through. A microphone on a speaker's

stand stood in the center of the round island for the officiant, and the guests began to sit

along the edges of the island on a rock wall. Both of the brides stood on the other side of

the bridge, changing into white wedding gowns. As before, *Chevy*'s gown was simply cut

with no embellishments. *Barella*'s, however, was covered in lace, ribbon, and bows. *Miss*

Falann, a madam on the sim and the officiant for this wedding, stepped to the speaker's

podium. While not as involved as other wedding planners, *Miss Falann* knew what *Chevy*

wanted from this ceremony and had advised her on how to proceed. *Chevy* walked down

the aisle first, followed by *Barella* a minute later.

Before the walk down the aisle, guests had breathed a sigh of relief. Conversation

flowed more freely in open chat. The guests appeared to be having fun. The piercing was

complete, and no first-life revelations had been noted despite the pre-wedding hints that

such a performance might occur. There was playful joking between the guests and the

brides, much like the end of the regular wedding rituals I observed. The guests suggested

that either bride could still run off before they sealed the deal, keeping the mood light.

The piercing had, in many way, satisfied all of the stages of the wedding ritual. The

guests had arrived and greeted each other (though not effusively), the bride arrived, a

ceremony was conducted ending in a climactic moment (the piercing), and the guests

were now at a new venue, just as they would be at the reception. There was nothing in the

wedding so far that differed from the other gendered weddings I had observed in Second

Life. In fact, this couple continued to use the symbolic elements of inworld ritual that

solidified society's cognitive matrix of beliefs about gender. They were clearly female

avatars who chose female animations, so both female residents were committing to a

sustained performance of femininity via the ritual so far.

Chevy and *Barella* continued to use established, culturally-acceptable animations

and ritual elements for the second wedding ceremony, which used many more of the

gendered symbolic elements. Both brides, for example, walked down the aisle, the

expected animation for a female performance. Both held flower bouquets instead of

wearing boutonnieres. Both were wearing clothing acceptable for brides, not for grooms.

After the brides approached the podium, *Miss Falann* called the group to be

serious and shushed everyone. Then, in solemn tones, she said:

> [13:04] Falann Sands: Reguardless of who they are their souls must be
>
> bound first on this afternoon. It needs to be witnessed by friends and
>
> family.

The phrase "regardless of who they are" was the first hint at the real controversy that lay ahead for *Chevy* and *Barella*, but *Miss Falann*'s position as officiant also pointed out the necessity for the guests to legitimize the union, one of the regulatory strands for the ritual. *Barella* was asked to say the vows first, which she did in local chat, just as all the rest of the ceremony had been conducted. When the time came for *Chevy*'s vows, *Miss Falann* started by saying:

> [13:05] Falann Sands: Chevy, do you declare your love here today to Barella. To stand by her side as her Wife, Mistress and Best Friend.
>
> Never to betray or dishonor her. Always respecting and treasuring her?

Miss Falann asked *Chevy* to commit to a performance as a wife and mistress, two roles gendered female. In response, *Chevy* went into voice, and the tall, elegant bride's mouth opened and spoke aloud for the first time. He started with a cough, then huskily said, "I do." I'm using the masculine pronoun at this point because the low rumble of the cough and the deepness of the voice made it clear that the user behind this avatar woman was actually in a man's body. *Chevy* made the decision to reveal her first-life male self in the ritual. Despite the committed performance to femininity *Chevy* had cultivated and agreed to based on the socially-constructed ritual, she decided to uncover a gender-switch at the exact point in the ceremony where she was being asked for a firm commitment to a female performance.

The community was gathered, in *Miss Falann*'s words, to witness the bonding between *Chevy* and *Barella*, yet part of that process was an unveiling of *Chevy*'s first-life self. After *Chevy* used voice, she turned it off and went back to using text. Two guests left at this point, disappearing with a poof of smoke in their wake as they disappeared

from the radar of the assembled guests, the same poof associated with teleporting, not with crashing. When they did return a few minutes later, they did not materialize in exactly the same spots as they did before, indicating they teleported from another sim rather than crashing. Nothing was said about their exit or their return. In Second Life, residents make comments when a person suddenly disappears from an area and reappears. This common courtesy acknowledges that the virtual world can be unstable, and a person may not intend to leave an area without saying good-bye. In addition, if an avatar has to leave a sim to go see something in another area of Second Life, they announce to the group that the reason for their departure and if they'll return. These guests did not announce their departure, and no one greeted them when they returned or mentioned their disappearance, which is the customary way of doing things at all events in Second Life. In fact, at this wedding, I crashed at one point, and the guests welcomed my avatar back in open chat when I returned. These guests left without a word and returned without anyone commenting. While the purpose of their exit was never stated, they performed a departure from the wedding, which can be read as disappointment in *Chevy*'s revelatory act.

A general lack of conversation brought the entire ceremony back to the slow pace and sense of solemnity that descended during the piercing ceremony. Other weddings have guests talking back to the bride and groom, encouraging them as they move through the ritual. In this case, a few words of encouragement were said before *Miss Falann* began, but during the ceremony, the guests said much less than during the other weddings I observed. Social capital wasn't flowing at this wedding as it had in my other observations.

Perhaps the most startling part of this revelation comes from the fact that *Chevy* had committed for years to a gendered performance, including a wedding ritual to her previous spouse, *slutkey Aeon*. The women celebrated a wedding ceremony in May of 2007, followed by a four-year relationship in Second Life.[192] *Chevy* would not talk at length about the relationship, saying that it ended sadly. From the evidence online, however, there is no indication that the wedding was anything but a normal, non-revelatory occasion. *Chevy*'s male biological user body remained tightly controlled. The wedding ceremony between *slutkey* and *Chevy* remained a ritual designed and performed by two female avatars. I propose *Chevy*'s complete acceptance as a woman in Second Life was partially based on her commitment to performing this ceremony in 2007. Five years later, when she made the decision to reveal her first-life, biologically male body, the revelation could be seen as doubly transgressive. Doubly-warranted, first through her partnership with *slutkey* and then the marriage with *Barella*, *Chevy* had committed to a performance in a female-gendered role, and she broke the fantasy put forward by her longstanding performance. The male user played as a female avatar for several years with text chat before making the decision at this ceremony to out himself via voice. *Chevy* had been accepted at a lesbian/female position on the grid, but his decision to introduce his first-life user's body confused that position, putting the body in motion between female/male and homosexual/heterosexual.

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[192] Information gathered through *Chevy Bravin*'s Facebook profile with subsequent links inside Second Life. As per my IRB restrictions, I cannot reveal her real avatar name by linking to this profile.

The wedding continued after *Chevy*'s revelation, starting with a more personal vow *Chevy* had written for her new wife. She told the tale of how they met after *Barella*'s former master had abandoned her. *Barella* had asked *Chevy* to take her on as a slave, but *Chevy* was hesitant. There was something she needed to do before agreeing to become *Barella*'s master:

> [13:12] Chevy Bravin: I explained to you about my RL and why you might have concerns on taking me as you rMistress You stated that it did not matter to you about what I am in RL.

Within their relationship, therefore, *Chevy* had revealed her first-life self, fulfilling what many believe is the right way of going about a relationship in the virtual world: telling those you are intimate with about your first-life gender. The wedding ceremony, however, is a ritual designed to establish two people in new roles within a community, and by revealing her user's gender, *Chevy* was, in essence, asking for the community's blessing of her gender-swapping avatar within her relationship with *Barella*. What *Chevy* didn't count on was the power of the positional grid. By asking for permission for her male user/female avatar position, she requested a position that society worked hard to regulate rather than allowing free, unrestricted performance.

Chevy's revelation was a transgression that caused a rupture in the social fabric of the virtual community. She broke the rule about keeping your first life private. In response, *Barella* deliberately masked her first-life identity. When *Miss Falann* turned to *Barella* to say her vows to *Chevy*, *Barella* responded by using text to indicate she was clearing her throat, a clear repetition of *Chevy*'s throat-clearing when she first started using voice to reveal her male first-life self. Her text action was a deliberate parody of

Chevy's vocal production, a performance with the distinct difference that nothing can be discovered through the anonymity of the chat window. *Barella*'s user was clearly present, paying attention to the ceremony and participating. By clearing her throat textually, she placed herself on an equal footing with *Chevy* in the performance through repetition but remained committed to the gendered performance required by the ritual. The difference, however, between text and voice once again shines a floodlight on the way gender is masked and regulated within Second Life. *Barella*'s throat clearing alerted us to the fact that she had understood *Chevy*'s revelation, but rather than take off the mask to reveal whether their relationship meets first-life standards, she continued to mask and blur her first-life user self. Within the context of the social, cultural, and economic commitments she made during the two ceremonies, *Barella* committed to a stabilized gender performance. She is *Chevy*'s mirror image, the veiled Second Life user to *Chevy*'s revealed first-life user, but one that commits to a gender. No one asked *Barella* to reveal her user's biological body during the ceremony or made any hint that such a revelation was necessary. She performed her position on the grid as society expects. She had committed to her performance, and the ritual had done its job.

After the performance, *Chevy* had to face the social regulations to stabilize her grid position. The end of the ceremony was celebratory, and in our initial interviews, *Chevy* felt that she could finally live as a complete person. Several months later, the celebration of her new status started to wane. Chateau de la Rose, *Chevy*'s sim, is one of

the top fifty sims in Second Life, according to Linden Lab.[193] Traffic, or the number of

visitors to a single sim, is a distinct indicator of popularity and one of the most sought

after accolades in Second Life. By virtue of its popularity, Chateau de la Rose was

chosen by Linden Lab as one of its picks in the Destination Guide, an honor that imbues

the sim with official status as one of the top adult sims in Second Life. If the residents

were angry enough with her performance, the sim would lose traffic and, eventually, its

status as a top destination. There are some indications that the sim did lose some of its

prestige. A large shopping mall on the sim, about the size of a Walmart, was full of

objects made by sim residents at the time of the ceremony. Several months later, this

same shopping mall had several empty wings indicating that residents had, indeed, left

Chateau de la Rose.

The postscript to *Chevy*'s performance came six months later. I logged onto

Second Life to ask *Chevy* for clarification on something she said in one of our interviews.

I clicked her name in my list of friends, and her profile popped up. *Chevy* had, at some

point in the week before, decided to change her shape back to that of a man. He is now

using a male body in both his first and second lives. I said hello, and *Chevy* politely asked

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[193] Wagner James Au, "Top 50 Most Popular Second Life Sims, August 2012," New

World Notes (blog), published September 5, 2012,

http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2012/09/top-50-second-life-sims-for-august-2012.html. Note

that the sim's name is actually Orburs. Chateau de la Rose is housed on the Orburs sim.

Map names can differ from the sim name when the land is rented from a third party other

than Linden Lab.

me who I was. This question seems strange in the context of Second Life communication practices. I am on his friend list, and I spent nearly twelve hours in conversation, both formal and informal, with him over the course of six months as well as attending social events in his presence. While it had been almost a month since our previous conversation, I found it difficult to believe he had completely forgotten me. I asked him if he had a moment to chat, and he asked me what I wanted to talk about. Again, with all of our conversations centered on his wedding, he seemed to be performing amnesia. How could the same user who told me he finally felt free to be himself conveniently forget what we had spoken about? When I reminded him of my research and my presence at his wedding, he said, "That was so long ago," followed by a statement that he was quite busy at that moment and would contact me later in the day. He never contacted me again.

In another interesting note, the wedding photo of *Chevy* and *Barella* that hangs in the foyer of the main building on the Chateau de la Rose sim has been replaced. The original wedding photo of two female avatars posing with their bouquets has been replaced with one of the pair posing as a male and a female avatar. Both *Chevy* and *Barella* have changed their profile information to use male pronouns for *Chevy* and only use photos of his male avatar. In looking around the buildings at Chateau de la Rose, no pictures or evidence exists of *Chevy* as a female avatar at all. It is as though her entire history has been replaced with one that matches her male user. Changes have happened at Chateau de la Rose. *Chevy* is no longer the owner of the sim. While the ownership of the land has changed, he appears to still be a part of the management of the BDSM community. Rather than being the sole avatar in charge, however, *Chevy* is one of a

group of people, and while he is listed as a manager, another avatar has the title of general manager.

I argue that *Chevy* faced a society that looked on her performance in the wedding ceremony and pressured this avatar to commit to a male avatar rather than a female one. Once *Chevy* indicated a willingness to bring her first-life user's body into the world, she became what Second Life society fears most: a sexually active resident in a female avatar body with a male user behind the screen. Since Second Life marriages rarely last, *Chevy* could be back on the dating market at some point. What if the next resident she begins a relationship with happens to be a male avatar with a male user? Society put pressure on *Chevy* to change into a stable form that wouldn't result in any unacceptable relationships in the future.

A year after the wedding, *Chevy* has added a new line of text to his profile in Second Life: "Everyone else please keep your views on my life to yourself. I only respect advice from a select few in that area.."[194] Despite his claim to being select in which advice to take, *Chevy* apparently gave into pressure to change not only his avatar but the entire history of that second life. The revised history serves as a reminder that there was always a man behind the screen, redacting any possible romance *Chevy* could have initiated with a male avatar inworld. With the potential for gender-switching eliminated, *Chevy* was able to return to being a part of Second Life.

Chevy attempted to step out of the gendered performance required by the ritual, but even a single statement that steps outside of the symbolism of the ceremony elicits

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[194] Chevy Bravin, Second Life Profile, accessed August 30, 2013.

censure. *Chevy* faced economic, social, and cultural repercussions after the ceremony, indicating that society demanded a way to tie his avatar body to the positional grid. He purposefully chose to perform the ritual in a way that didn't commit to an inworld gender, and because of his choice, society had to find a way to keep the body in stasis on the grid rather than in movement. Through economics, culture, and his social group, *Chevy* made the decision to conform to a position on the grid.

Slag Loon and Plath Skytower

I knew what *Plath* and *Slag*'s wedding venue would look like before I teleported to the sim. *gem Shan*, a wedding planner and friend in Second Life, had invited me to many of her ceremonies, and since her entire sim is dedicated to weddings, they generally look very similar. Like most wedding planners in Second Life, *gem* is responsible for setting up all the objects for the wedding as well as acting as officiant. She creates special bouquets and ornaments to order for each couple, but the white gazebo by the sea is where all of the ceremonies take place. It's a peaceful place. Waves lap against the rocks, and a soft breeze blows through the palm trees. The white pews on this particular day were decorated with blue ribbons.

gem originally told me that this was going to be a gay wedding. Her description, however, did not begin to approach what the wedding turned out to be. In retrospect, *gem*'s description of the wedding as "gay" was a way for her to explain what she couldn't understand: a wedding where gender was never quite discernible. She decided to assign "male" to *Slag*'s body, but *Slag*'s performance resisted that designation. Rather than settling into a firm position on the positional grid, *Slag* jumps between male and female

easily, pointing out the instability of the grid as well as the regulatory strands holding a digital body in place.

Slag was not a conventional bride(groom). The shape of *Slag*'s avatar is purposefully androgynous. Despite the program's ability to craft each avatar's appearance with thirty-seven different features that can be altered on a sliding scale of one to one hundred, each user must choose a male or female shape to begin with, and the body features then correspond to the biological markers associated with that gender. A male avatar's jaw, for example, can be more or less square, while a female avatar's jaw can be more or less rounded. Other sliders are more overtly named. For the first eight years of Second Life's existence, male avatars had a slider called "Package" which would increase the bulge in their crotch from "Coin Purse" to "Duffel Bag."[195] In other words, the sliders themselves are programmed to hold ideals of gendered beauty, and creating a shape that goes against these norms can be very difficult. In a forum thread about finding androgynous shapes and skins, *Khamon Fate* shared how his avatar shape "seems clearly male" to him, yet he still had people assuming he's a female avatar. *Barnesworth Anubis*, who knew *Khamon* inworld, responded, "I will admit for awhile I didnt know what you were Khamon. You need to crank up the package slider."[196] While *Barnesworth* might not have been able to clearly articulate that he was suggesting *Khamon* follow virtual

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[195] "Why does boob slider only go to 100% :(," Second Life Forum Archives, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/e7/91213/2.html, March 6, 2006.

[196] Barnesworth Anubis, "Avatars and Androgyny," *Second Life Forum Archives*, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/ad/105939/1.html, May 10, 2006.

gender protocol, his suggestion told *Khamon* that the solution to his quandary was to use the virtual society's embodied skills to achieve the social capital he was looking for.

It is those skills, values, and expectations, the virtual habitus, which give the appearance of gender control. *Slag*'s appearance proved problematic in the ceremony. *Slag* created the shape *Slag* wears, and the smooth face, vaguely pubescent breasts, and lithe body shows a high level of skill in manipulating the program. *Slag* has learned what people in Second Life value, and the work *Slag* put into the avatar shape meant *Slag* received cultural capital in the world. People might be startled by the appearance of an androgynous avatar, but they are bound by cultural rules to respect the creativity. By relying solely on Second Life tools, *Slag* continually demonstrates the potential for androgyny by performing movement between male and female.

Slag mixed masculine and feminine throughout his look rather than simply having the avatar take on the preprogrammed biological markers associated with masculinity and femininity. Lean and slender, *Slag*'s body has pert, small breasts and a smooth, rounded face that give the impression of a young girl. At the same time, *Slag*'s avatar has very large feet, far more manly than dainty, yet the shape has hands that are small and delicate. *Slag*'s body leaves people to wonder what *Slag* is trying to project. This avatar, in *Barnesworth Anubis'*s words, needs to think about raising his package slider if *Slag* wishes to be known as a man. Similarly, *Slag* needs to consider his foot size and height if *Slag* wants to be considered a female avatar.

Slag's sense of creativity extended to the objects used to dress the avatar. The initial impression of this bride walking down the aisle was that Cupid had taken *Slag*'s place. Large angel wings encircled *Slag*'s shoulder, and the bride(groom) sported a

flowing skirt that was long in the front and the back and short on the sides. The huge feet were strapped into almost Biblical sandals, masculine and dusty, while around *Slag*'s arms, wrists, and neck, delicate gold jewelry glistened. *Slag* was topless for the ceremony with only a thin white sash draped across the chest. One breast was covered, one was not. Where every other bride I observed opted for a carefully built and textured gown from the best designers in Second Life, *Slag*'s "gown" was made of loosely linked prims arranged to look like something between a short skirt and a kilt on two sides and a tea-length gown on the other two sides, and the clothing was textured with the standard images given to every resident. Residents of Second Life would look at this wedding outfit and believe it to be either made by *Slag*, suggesting an amateur building status, or dating back from the earliest days of the world before cultural competencies pushed the standards for fashion higher. By using this wedding attire, *Slag* put the economic regulations behind the ritual on display by referencing an early period in Second Life history when the creation of the wedding gown was a necessity. *Slag* asked the guests to remember the early days of the world, a more open space of potential before social regulations could be put into place.

During the ceremony, *Slag* chose to use female animations for the walk down the aisle, exchange of rings, first kiss with *Plath*, and the variety of photo animations available at this wedding venue. *gem* told me that she offered the pair male or female animations for their wedding, since there was no indication whether *Slag* was male or female. She explained that some same sex couples will opt to use two masculine or feminine animations during the ceremony rather than a male/female animation pairing. Throughout the ceremony, the couple opted for *Slag* to use female animations and *Plath*

to use male ones. The situation changed, however, during the reception, when the dances were chosen specifically so *Plath* could be making wide, sweeping, graceful feminine movements associate with the female poseball while *Slag*'s movements had less hip motion and were based in a wider, more masculine stance suitable for the male poseball. The animations, therefore, continued *Slag*'s practice of vacillating back and forth between feminine and masculine.

This couple, with *gem*'s help, designed a traditional Second Life wedding complete with the same symbolic elements as other ceremonies. *Slag* and *Plath*, however, used their performance to differentiate themselves from other iterations of the ritual. I noticed the difference immediately. While the initial greeting phase was similar to other weddings I had experienced in Second Life, the conversation differed because the guests didn't know each other. People began to arrive, and greetings were exchanged while we all waited for *Slag* to arrive. This greeting period is a necessary way of acknowledge the social quality of the world. In *SunsetSky Midnight* and *Blaser Xue*'s wedding, for example, there were twenty minutes of happy chatter performed ahead of the ceremony. What follows is one minute of that greeting period:

> [05:11 PM] Lacey Deckard: hi there Zoey :)
>
> [05:11 PM] SallyAnn Eccleston: Prax
>
> [05:11 PM] Tifany Huckleberry: Hi, Sunny and Fancy and Ivanglas
>
> [05:11 PM] SallyAnn Eccleston: huggs
>
> [05:11 PM] Zoey Newlon: Hi Lacey!
>
> [05:11 PM] Blaser Xue: Morgana - gtsy :)
>
> [05:11 PM] Tifany Huckleberry: Hi, Kevanna and Alexina

[05:11 PM] Zoey Newlon: Hi Morgana

[05:11 PM] Bridget Jennings: Ivan!

[05:11 PM] Prax Maryjasz: ooooh there is Ladyheart.......waves

[05:11 PM] Fancy Free: hi, Tifany

[05:11 PM] Tifany Huckleberry: Hi, Kaipa.

[05:11 PM] Mae Noel: hi Zoey and Clint:)

[05:11 PM] Cheetah Dirkle: Do they have portapotty's here?

[05:11 PM] Prax Maryjasz: hahhahaha, lion

[05:11 PM] Tifany Huckleberry: Hi, Twisted.

[05:11 PM] SallyAnn Eccleston: Ladyheart huggs

[05:11 PM] Kaipa Tangent: Hi Tifany

[05:11 PM] Lacey Deckard: Tommy, keep Blaser propped up will ya?

[05:11 PM] Fancy Free: hhhahahha, lion

[05:11 PM] Twisted Firestorm: hi

[05:11 PM] Blaser Xue: I may have to steal Tifany's tag

[05:11 PM] Zoey Newlon: Hi Beth =)

[05:11 PM] Bridget Jennings: building allowed - rez one

[05:11 PM] Miles Caerndow: just use the flowers pop

[05:11 PM] Tifany Huckleberry: Hi, Tommy

[05:11 PM] SallyAnn Eccleston: giggles

[05:11 PM] Frillylove Benelli: LOL Lacey

[05:11 PM] Clint Westwood: hi David and Beth

[05:11 PM] Alexina Proctor: Hugs Cat :)

[05:11 PM] Prax Maryjasz: waves to Legion

[05:11 PM] Miles Caerndow: Hi Tifany

[05:11 PM] Zoey Newlon: HI David

Compared to this example, the silence at *Plath* and *Slag*'s ceremony was distinct. In the former case, the conversation is an exchange of social capital that says, "We are friends. We borrow the luster of each other's cultural. We are a part of this social world. And in this tie of friendship, we stand together to approve this ritual." At *Plath* and *Slag'*s wedding, people appeared in the customary ball gowns and tuxedos, but a sense of curious disconnection settled over the crowd. No one seemed to know anyone else. It was as though a group of complete strangers had suddenly been transported to this area to witness a wedding.

Plath and *Slag* explained to me in their interview that they have very separate groups of friends from their different activities in Second Life. That was their explanation for the silence, but the reason struck me as odd from a virtual perspective. As a researcher, I have often been to weddings where I was the only person that no one knew, and avatars in attendance would privately message me or ask me in open chat who I was and what I was doing at the ceremony. After finding out my purpose and who I was, they would speak to me in the open chat window for everyone to hear, drawing me into the social event and introducing me to each particular group. In this particular case, the comments in open chat made it clear that people were confused about how everyone knew each other, and without any clear connections, this group seemed unable to make introductions or attempt to create connections with the larger group. The disquiet brought these avatars into an unusual situation. Their greetings could not be echoed as the social

nature of Second Life demanded, since there were no social connections. When there was no one to greet, these residents sat silently.

Avital Ronell describes such technologically mediated voices finding familiarity and yet discomfort as an example of Freud's concept of *unheimlich,* or the uncanny.[197] These avatars are calling to each other in a world that is familiar and which they have built around themselves as an insular world. In coming across a ceremony where they should find others of like mind, these guests instead found themselves outsiders looking in on what should have been a normal ritual. Looking at their profiles and their appearance, these guests came from a variety of subgroups in the virtual world: a furry, a woman with a Neko tail, a madam at an escort club, and a clothing designer among others. Since Linden Lab started offering private islands in 2007, groups can purchase their own area and live without interacting with Second Life as a whole. As an imagined community, as Benedict Anderson would describe it, Second Life residents recognize that different groups other than the ones they belong to exist and consider everyone residents, yet the possibility of actually meeting and interacting with such people is very slim unless you search them out.[198] Being confronted with so many different types of subgroups as well as finding little common ground forces a sense of looking on in on society from the outside, creating the sense of the uncanny, which opens "an invasion or

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[197] Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 69.

[198] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

hemorrhage" in the settled understanding of self.[199] Matthew Causey extends this

argument by suggesting that in virtual spaces when unfamiliar voices speak to us through

the screen we are forced to consider who is on the other side of the screen.[200] When the

greeting period for this wedding began, the avatars tried to understand who would be

with them in this ritual legitimization, and the conversation was stilted and formal.

> [12:46] Zylina Straaf: LadyCheetah, have we met before? You seem
>
> familiar :-)
>
> [12:46] Plath Skytower: thanks for the group niotice, zylina
>
> [12:47] Abish Sweetgirl: DO we need voice on, to hear??
>
> [12:47] Jinn Jigsaw: hello there =) gratulations yet?
>
> [12:47] ₮ℓʋ₸₸y : hello new friends ㋡
>
> [12:47] gem Shan: no, it will be in local chat
>
> [12:47] Abish Sweetgirl: okay.. thank you
>
> [12:47] Abish Sweetgirl: I will go find a seat :))
>
> [12:47] moebius Zeiler: let me find a place i can hide. So many people :)
>
> [12:49] Zylina Straaf: Heyas new people, so many :-)
>
> [12:49] Wayne Windlow: Hiya Ice. Good to see a familiar face in this
>
> crowd lol

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[199] Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 69.

[200] Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

Note that this portion of the greeting period took three minutes. In a side-by-side comparison with *SunsetSky* and *Blaser*'s wedding guests, the avatars at *Plath* and *Slag*'s wedding tried to fill time by acknowledging people, but the greetings did not flow easily because they lacked the social connection. One or two people knew each other, but many others tried unsuccessfully to establish if or how they knew each other. The normal greeting pattern, demonstrated by the example from *Sky* and *Blaser*'s wedding, exchanges social capital by recognizing friendships, but in *Plath* and *Slag*'s case, avatars were searching for what social capital was available and often came up short. Every wedding that I observed except for the two weddings in this chapter followed the pattern established by the ritual. Each of those eighteen weddings started with a period of establishing and celebrating social connections. Without that pattern, *Plath* and *Slag*'s ceremony was immediately different from the others that I observed. Because the wedding lacked any opening exchange of social capital, *Slag* and *Plath*'s wedding was attended by a group of people who don't share social capital and cannot invest the ritual. The performers called one of the regulatory strands for the ritual, the social investment, into question from the moment the guests arrived.

The getting-to-know-you period continued to drag on, but it was cut short by the officiant, *gem*, hurrying us into the pews. The wedding was about to start. As she told me later, *Plath* was insisting she get the wedding guests in place, cutting short the period when the guests were going through the initial phases of trying to decipher each other's performances. Rather than being able to complete that task, the guests were hustled into the venue. The next step of the ceremony is the arrival of the bride, and everyone was expecting *Slag* to instantly appear.

At first, this portion of the wedding seemed to be running smoothly. *gem* told the guests that the wedding would start in a few minutes, and that *Plath* had informed her that *Slag* was having difficulty logging into the world but would arrive shortly. In both of their profiles, *Plath* and *Slag* mention that they have been best friends and living together in first life for over a decade. This marriage, it seemed to me at the time, would reify gender because the couple had warranted the first-life biological markers behind the avatar. They would be performing the gendered roles from first life, ones already warranted by seeing each other's first-life bodies. Society would view this first-life connection as a great piece of cultural capital, since the wedding would mimic the first inworld wedding and the accompanying first-life relationship.

Their profiles, however, made that warranting unstable. They claimed to be living together in first life, yet as we waited as *Slag* and *Plath* continued to make excuses, it became unclear if *Plath* was actually in the same location in first life. *Plath*, who claims to be a computer expert, said he was going to fix *Slag*'s computer. There were moment of silence from *Plath* as though he were busy interacting with *Slag*, but during that period, his avatar didn't slump in the away position. When a user doesn't touch the keyboard for a couple of minutes, the avatar slumps forward as though sleeping on his feet, and a tag appears above the avatar's head that says away. *Plath* kept his avatar active, meaning he was touching his keyboard, yet he claimed to be helping *Slag* get his computer working. Would he not need to leave his keyboard long enough to justify an away slump? Again, the pair called into question another regulatory strand of the performance. The pair has clear knowledge of inworld culture based on their activities and decisions with the ceremony, but they also selectively ignore the same cultural norms.

Slag didn't arrive in just a few minutes as *Plath* had promised. In fact, it took him nearly thirty minutes to arrive. There was plenty of time to return to the initial getting-to-know-you phase that had been cut short, but with continual promises that *Slag* would arrive soon coming from both *Plath* and *gem*, the conversation among the guests was kept to a minimum. Any intent to begin a conversation about how the people in the audience knew each other was short-circuited by each of these promises. Most guests went AFK, which means that the users walked away from their keyboards to do other things in first life while waiting for *Slag* to appear. The guests might have been carrying on conversations in private chat windows away from open chat, but since there's no way for any avatar to tell through the program who was typing to whom in private chat, it appeared that the audience was sitting in silence, very unlike the social quality of the virtual world.

This ritual is designed for two avatars to perform gender and have a group representing the Second Life community legitimize their performance, adding a layer of social commitment. These guests arrived in a venue that looked like a typical Second Life wedding, but they were asked to legitimize a wedding without the common bonds that would lead to socialization within the group during the ceremony. Linda Hutcheon defines parody as "repetition with a critical difference,"[201] and this wedding fits that description in the way it simulated the ritual as it was normally performed but with distinct changes. The guests were given just enough of the expected format of a virtual

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[201] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 6.

wedding to believe that that was what they were there to do, but in essence, they were being given a performance with a critical difference at each stage of the ceremony.

Once *Slag* arrived, *gem* encouraged everyone to take their places quickly, and as they did so, she told *Slag* to jump on the poseball that would walk the bride down the aisle towards *Plath*. For all of *gem*'s weddings, she controls the bride and groom's animations once they jump on the poseball, meaning bride and groom are supposed to place themselves in the hands of the high priest of the ceremony until the wedding is complete. At this wedding, *Slag* made it difficult for the high priest to gain control. *gem*, who was already conscious of the fact that the wedding was late getting started, urged *Slag* to jump on the poseball as quickly as possible.

Poseballs are very normal things to come across in Second Life. Each poseball is loaded with one or more animations that are activated when a user right clicks and selects the animation. At that point, the program begins to animate the avatar body with whatever animations are scripted inside the poseball. A chair, for example, would be scripted with sitting animations. Getting onto a poseball is one of the first skills needed in Second Life, a cultural competency related to embodied capital. Bourdieu notes that essential skills have to be demonstrated to show that a person has gathered and maintained embodied cultural capital.[202] Their bodies and their performances demonstrate that they understand society's rules and regulations. From the moment an avatar enters Second Life, a resident is aware of the cultural capital involved with poseballs. One of the very first activities that each user must accomplish on the welcome island when he

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[202] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 241-58.

first logs in is right clicking and jumping onto a poseball. Because it is a part of this training session for virtual habitus, this action is a part of embodied capital in the virtual world.

Both *Plath* and *Slag* performed a parody of this basic action as soon as *Slag* arrived. When he took his place at the altar, *Plath* started asking where to stand as though he had never used an animation in Second Life before. His animation was a large, blue ball labeled "Groom" hovering right above the altar. No other wedding I viewed in person or on video had a groom ask this question. Poseballs are part of the seamless world of Second Life. If you see a pink poseball, you're a user with a female avatar, and you wish to use the animation, you right click your mouse and use it. Animations aren't talked about. They are acted upon. They are part of the invisible fabric of how society works, a distinct part of habitus. For *Plath* to ask which poseball meant he called attention to the poseball itself. How could he miss the huge blue poseball marked groom? *gem* tried to point the poseball out to *Plath*, an almost comical performance of pointing out the obvious.

> [13:05] Plath Skytower: Which poseball, gem?
>
> [13:05] gem Shan: The one marked grrom
>
> [13:05] gem Shan: Groom
>
> [13:05] Plath Skytower: Where?
>
> [13:06] gem Shan: The one you just clicked
>
> [13:06] Zylina Straaf: lol
>
> [13:06] Plath Skytower: This one?
>
> [13:06] Ŧレυꝁꝁy :are we starting soon?

Plath jumps on the poseball, then jumps off

[13:07] gem Shan: Plath, stay on the poseball

[13:07] Plath Skytower: Sorry

Slag, at the same time, jumped on and off the "walk down the aisle" animation, much to the consternation of *gem*. The guests laughed at times, but even they seemed annoyed that *Slag* and *Plath* were wasting time. After all, *Plath* and *Slag* have been avatars in Second Life for more than three years. As *gem* told me when I spoke to her later, "Anyone who can't jump on a poseball shouldn't be in SL." The annoyance highlighted something, however, that was critical to the transgressive nature of this wedding. The choices *Plath* and *Slag* were making kept parodying the "proper" Second Life wedding in subtle ways. Their playful choices highlight how each user must make decisions within societal norms when creating and operating her avatar and how these choices place her inside economic, cultural, and social regulations. As the guests sat and watched, this performance was not what they arrived to see. They expected a wedding ritual, and instead, they were treated to a performance of *Plath* and *Slag* ignoring *gem*'s instructions in her role as the high priest of the ritual. The guests occasionally chimed in to tell the pair to pick a ball and use it, but the wedding couple persisted in their play. *gem* told me privately after the ceremony that she kept private messaging both of them, giving them instructions on how to use the animations, thinking that they didn't know how to use the poseballs. *Slag* and *Plath* are both experienced Second Life residents. *Plath* is a builder. *Slag* is a DJ. They have often used these exact kinds of poseballs. I believe their performance of cultural incompetency actually put gender in the spotlight in a way that unmasked its invisible nature in Second Life. When *Plath* asked which

poseball to use, all the while staring at a large blue poseball clearly marked for his role, he seemed to be asking, "For me? This blue poseball? For masculinity? Here, I'll learn to get on this poseball and perform this action." Since *gem* couldn't control *Plath* and *Slag*'s animations until they jumped on these poseballs, she couldn't step into her role as high priest. Their incompetency highlights *gem*'s role as the controller of the ceremony and rejects her authority to control their actions.

When *Slag* followed *Plath*'s performance with another demonstration of cultural incompetency, the guests would have to question whether *Slag* actually had the embodied capital to go through with the wedding. *Slag* is a successful DJ, which shows that he has advanced cultural competencies in the areas of manipulating the program and streaming music. Even for the guests who didn't know the bride, they could see *Slag*'s profile was completely filled out and included an edited photo, another suggestion of cultural competency, since many younger, inexperienced avatars opt for no photo or a poorly taken snapshot. *Slag* knows what is required of avatars, so the performed ignorance of how to use a poseball kept the guests in suspense. During *Slag*'s many questions of how to use a poseball, the guests sat in silence, some starting to type, others sitting and watching. None showed the away sign above their heads. They were watching. If the guests had been a cohesive social group, these acts might have been seen as interesting and different. When avatars do crazy things in Second Life, such as walking into a wall because the user hits the wrong button, good-natured ribbing generally follows. The residents at this ceremony didn't type the same kind of witty repartee that the poseball fiasco should have incited. They didn't know what to make of the performance.

When *Slag* started down the aisle, we were all aware that *Slag* had made the choice, finally, to begin the journey toward *Plath* by staying on the poseball. The guests were also aware of the uncertainty surrounding this genderless, odd-looking avatar that seemed from his profile to be able to navigate Second Life but couldn't execute the simplest of actions. *Slag*'s ability to fit into the world was in question at the beginning of the ceremony, but the claims the couple made in their profiles further disrupted the ritual. In their profiles, they listed each other as best friends for many years in first life before entering Second Life together, but they make no allusion to first-life identities apart from this information. In fact, nothing indicates the validity of their first-life relationship. There is nothing in the first-life tab under their profiles where many first life couples tend to put photographs of their biological bodies together to demonstrate their highest level of cultural capital. *Plath* and *Slag* show no desire to take advantage of the wealth of capital available to them through a first-life romance. Their profiles mention their relationship, but do so only in platonic terms, not in the words of passion and romance seen in other profiles:

> Slag Loon: my best friend forever is Plath Skytower. we have been best friends since 2002 - way before sl came into being.! he has taken care of me since i was 12 and continues to do it to this day. full of love but he is english and doesnt talk alot... unless you think ok, maybe, shush and NO are normal.

Compare those sentiments with the pronouncements of love in the profiles of three other brides: *SunsetSky*, *silverwhite*, and *Bother Hax*:

> *SunsetSky*: No Matter where our path takes us, you will always

hold a very special place in my heart, and will always be my

friend...memories we have shared will never die..

This man, has left heart prints.......

You're the pot of gold at the end of my rainbow Married Nov.30th, 2012

June 11th will always be a night to remember... smile

silverwhite: For Wotan: She looks to the sky, seeing the white owl spread

his wings, soaring through life, wanting to soar with him, her dreams

travel far as she holds her cubs close to her, knowing one day they to will

fly and she will be alone. A smile creeps to her lips, knowing someone

waits for her, longing to live her dreams with her, because of him, her life

has new meaning.

Bother Hax: HE THINKS MY DRESSES ARE TOO SHORT,AND MY

PANTS TOO LOW BUT HE LETS ME BE ME. HE MAKES ME

SMILE, HE TREATS ME WITH RESPECT..HE IS WONDERFUL. I

WILL ALWAYS FEEL LUCKY TO HAVE MET HIM IN THIS LIFE.

The three female avatars gush about their loves, yet *Slag* is cautious and doesn't speak of

love. *Plath* and *Slag* seem more like friends than lovers, yet they are going through a

ceremony. Is this the gay wedding *gem* described to me? Is it a wedding between a

woman and a man? *Slag*'s gender stays a mystery to some. *Slag* told me in our interview

that some of their closest friends in Second Life know he's a male in first life, though

Slag offered no verification of that fact to me. *Slag* performed male during our interview,

but at other times, *Slag* performs in an overtly feminine way. They never use voice. *Slag*

told me in our interview that voice made him break out in hives. The world is even

denied the unreliable voice verification that is so relied on in the virtual space. The warranting information about *Slag*'s first life seems suspicious, and the ritual, performed in such a haphazard way, does little to alleviate the unease about what lurks behind the screen. *Slag* claims to be a man in first life, but if that information is true, the gendered performance doesn't adhere to the "male" position on the societal grid. Since *Slag* skips into the "female" position on occasion, society once again faces a possible male user body that could pass as a woman inworld.

The exchange of vows came quickly after *Slag* finally got on the poseball. The bride walked down the aisle, and *gem* began to expound on the virtues of love, just as every ceremony requires leading up to the vows. The script was noticeable by the double use of the word minister, but interestingly, *gem* had to stop the script and speak through the minister role when *Slag* decided the vows weren't correct.

> [13:33] Minister: Minister: Love is the core of your union and why you are here today.
>
> [13:33] Minister: Minister: It will take trust, to know in your hearts that you want what is truly best for each other.
>
> [13:33] Minister: Minister: It will take dedication, to stay open to one another and to learn and grow together.
>
> [13:34] Minister: Minister: It will take faith, to go forward together without knowing exactly what the future holds.
>
> [13:34] Minister: Minister: And it will take commitment, to hold true to the journey that both of you are beginning here today.

[13:34] Minister: Minister: Plath, do you take Slag to be your wife? To love, honour, comfort and cherish her, for better or worse, in sickness and in health from this day forward?

[13:34] SLAG giggles

[13:35] Minister: So sorry. Lol

[13:35] Minister: Try again.

[13:36] Minister: Minister: Plath, do you take Slag to be your husband? To love, honour, comfort and cherish him, for better or worse, in sickness and in health from this day forward?

[13:37] SLAG giggles

[13:40] Minister: Minister: Plath, do you take Slag to be your companion? To love, honour, comfort and cherish Slag, for better or worse, in sickness and in health from this day forward?

[13:40] Plath Skytower: I do

[13:41] Minister: Minister: Slag, do you take Plath to be your companion? To love, honour, comfort and cherish Plath, for better or worse, in sickness and in health from this day forward?

[13:41] SLAG: i do take him as my husband, with all the love in the world[203]

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[203] The double minister name in this section indicates that *gem* was wearing and using the officiant's HUD during the wedding. The script spits out two names instead of a single

Slag accepted and assigned gendered pronouns to *Plath*, but he rejected the gendered

pronouns and roles for himself during one of the most critical portions of the wedding.

Just as *gem* adjusted the ceremony to fit *Slag*'s wishes, *Slag* once again turned the

performance around and demanded gendered pronouns. If the speech act was designed to

tie *Slag* and *Plath* together in the eyes of society, the couple's actions required that the act

do so in a way that recognized and accepted *Slag*'s play with gender. The ritual was

disrupted from a time standpoint because of *Slag*'s actions. The minister's HUD keeps the

animations and performance clipping along at a fast pace, demonstrated by the time

stamps. *Slag*'s interruption forces the ritual to stop its seamlessness and deal with gender

in real time, a startling disruption to what had been an invisible performance of gender

roles. *Plath* remains in the groom role and seems comfortable taking the role of

"husband," but *Slag* refuses the gendered roles within the vows. *Slag* decided when to be

gendered, just as was allowed in the original openness of Second Life. It is his world and

his imagination, and no one else can tell him what someone will or will not be.

The pair's unique vows similarly played off of the gendered roles present in the

ceremony. While the other weddings I observed used the vows as a way of solidifying a

male/female grid position through masculine and feminine performance, *Plath* and *Slag*

seem to slip out of the positions set by society:

---

one. When *gem* types a line of text manually, a single minister name appears. When she

is operating the HUD, which is typing for her, the double minister occurs.

[13:44] Plath Skytower: My Dearest SLag, weve been through so much together. You are the reason I get up in the morning. I am devoted to you. Only you. Forever. Please be mine?

 [13:45] SLAG: Plath....... I will always be honest with you, kind, patient, and forgiving. But most of all, I promise to be a Best Friend to you. I will be with you for always and more!!!!!

Plath takes the feminine role in his vows, wrapping up his existence in *Slag*. He even goes so far as to ask *Slag* again to be his, an odd question considering the marriage ritual is nearly over. *Slag*, on the other hand, shows no masculine or feminine tendencies in the vow. *Slag* doesn't even speak words of love, but friendship. These vows don't stabilize the gender of these two digital bodies. Instead, the two avatars quickly switch their grid positions, showing how each of them can slip out of the positions dictate by society. While they move from a feminine position to a male position, their vacillation proves that such movement is still a possibility, referencing the earlier days of Second Life before society had regulated gender through this ceremony.

When *Slag* playfully rejected *gem*'s vows, he demonstrated a rejection of her authority to pronounce a gender upon him. Her lack of authority was put into the spotlight. She was not the unquestioned officiant who presided over most ceremonies and stood in place of the residents of Second Life. *Slag* playfully turned *gem*'s authority upside down, and in doing so, he called the symbolic elements of the ritual into question. Pronouns were not to be used. *Slag* wanted to be and performed as a genderless avatar. *gem* was a perfectly fine authority under normal circumstances in Second Life, but when faced with *Slag*, she wasn't able to force this resident into a gender. *Slag* exposed the

flimsy quality of this ceremony designed to bind a resident to gender. The result was that his performance became the ruling authority, something that neither *gem* nor the audience was necessarily prepared for. As *Slag* told me in my interview with him:

> [12:39 AM] Slag Loon: i didn't want people to think this was just an ordinary wedding. i'm not ordinary, i'm different
>
> [12:40 AM] Slag Loon: no one has to know what i am in order to know who i am

Following the vows, *gem* maintained the format of a virtual wedding and pronounced the pair married. *Slag* once again demonstrated his desire to upend norms at this stage in the ceremony:

> [13:45] Minister: Minister: Now that *Plath* & *Slag* have pledged their love before us a their witnesses, I, gem Shan, can pronounce that you will continue your journey through Second Life as husband and partner.
>
> [13:46] SLAG: ❤*•·¸('*• PLATH •*´)¸.•*❤ ♥ I Love You! ♥
>
> [13:46] Minister: Minister: Pauses….
>
> [13:46] Minister: Minister: Plath, the moment you have been waiting for …….
>
> [13:46] Minister: Minister: ……….. you may kiss your partner
>
> [13:47] Koran Sparta: waves im home
>
> [13:47] bubbles Ordinary: congratulations
>
> [13:47] SLAG: ☆ .·¸¸.·*¨ ·»* .·¸¸.·*¨ ·»* .·¸¸.·*¨☆
>
> [13:47] SLAG: ❤ I LOVE MY WONDERFUL HUSBAND ❤
>
> [13:47] SLAG: ☆ .·¸¸.·*¨ ·»* .·¸¸.·*¨ ·»* .·¸¸.·*¨☆

[13:47] bubbles Ordinary: clapsss

[13:47] George Hexicola: hip hip

[13:48] Minister: Minister: It is my honor, to present you, for the first time as a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Slag and Plath Skytower.

[13:48] Kathryn Karillion: Applause ☺

> *Note the pause in time. The minister's script had to be redone. Also note the lack of conversation*

[13:52] Minister: Minister: It is my honor, to present you, for the first time as a couple, Slag and Plath.

Slag jumps in to congratulate and shout words of love to his new spouse before *gem* had the chance to offer the pair a chance to kiss. Before society could pass judgment on his action, *Slag* interjected a statement of love, one which *gem*, as the minister, quickly yet subtly reprimanded with a pause in the wedding script. By shouting love for *Plath*, *Slag* reminded the guests of the reason behind the marriage: a love between two people. Questions about gender may have been at the forefront of their minds, but *Slag*'s interjection again digressed from the topic of gender and placed it in another realm, that of emotion and virtual relationships, the supposed reason for the ritual in the first place. *Slag*'s comment is a gesture, a special command that can be programmed by any resident to spit out a line of text when a single button is pushed. Lines of open chat with special characters cannot be created within the Second Life program, and because of the time needed to create such characters, *Slag* made a gesture that would type these words in open chat quickly. Again, *Slag* performs a cultural competency (the making of a gesture) for the group but interjects at a time when the guests should be applauding the union, not

the couple going through the ceremony. *Slag*'s actions not only kept us guessing about where to place this avatar in the virtual community, but *Slag*'s actions also rejected the social capital that comes at the end of the ceremony that legitimizes the performance.

The guests did not leap to congratulate the couple after the kiss, a fact clear from the time stamps in the congratulations following the kiss. The group was slow to move toward the reception area, and even as the dancing got started, conversation did not flow as easily as it had at other weddings. *Plath* and *Slag* did little to encourage the conversation. In the other weddings I witnessed, the bride and groom are the chattiest of the bunch, enjoying the social interaction as much as their guests. *Plath* and *Slag* moved into their dance and did not interact with guests. Guests slowly said their good-byes at the reception, and after forty-five minutes, nearly everyone had left the venue. This reception was the shortest I attended by far. Most receptions last close to an hour and a half, with the longest I attended lasting three hours past the ceremony.

The postscript to *Slag* and *Plath*'s tale is that *Slag* has since disappeared from Second Life. When I went to log in to Second Life to begin writing this section in January 2013, I noticed that he was no longer on my friends list. A search of Second Life showed he was no longer listed as an avatar, and *Plath*'s profile had a blank entry under partner. In *Plath*'s profile, his pick of *Slag*, previously a place where *Plath* had called *Slag* his best friend, was empty except for a single word: "Gone?" After checking again in November 2013, *Plath*, too, has left the world.

Many avatars leave Second Life for a lot of reasons, but the fact that *Slag* bucked the system to perform gender differently than prescribed may have put *Slag* in society's line of fire. Society creates habitus and norms to regulate its citizens, and to step outside

those norms is to invite correction back to what is acceptable. It is possible putting aside habitus and gender norms put *Slag* in danger. Performing as a genderless avatar is accepted in Second Life, but when these avatars enter a romantic relationship, the wedding ritual demands they commit to a gendered performance. *Slag* rejected this regulatory device, but the economic, social, and cultural regulatory strands may have caught up with him. Remembering that *Slag* performed as a DJ inworld, his group notices give some hint of what might have occurred. Following the wedding, *Slag* had only three gigs as a DJ. Since DJs rely on avatars coming to their dances, it's possible that people simply stopped coming to see him perform. *Slag* turned the marriage ritual into an upside down version with a playful, parodic spin, and *Slag* exposed the parody of the ceremony and the rules that controlled it. By persisting in a genderless performance in a ceremony that demands gender, *Slag* effectively demonstrated the constraints of society, the edges of its habitus. Though he did so playfully, it's possible that he pushed at the boundaries too hard, creating a backlash that forced him out of the virtual world. Gender, even in its virtual form, does not like to be trifled with.

The Need to Regulate Gender

Second Life residents fear the male user in the female avatar body. Within the social atmosphere of this virtual world, where romantic relationships are encouraged and abound, the marriage ritual is designed to contain any surprise revelations of a gender-switching avatar by demanding a high degree of commitment to the performance. Avatars who step outside the bounds of these contained performances face the social restrictions reserved for those people stepping outside of habitus.

Ethnographic studies such as this one serve to document what is happening within a specific culture as well as what people are saying about those events in order to uncover deeply held social and cultural beliefs.[204] This type of study also gives a researcher the chance to step away from the culture and analyze the observations from a distance. This method proves helpful in looking at Second Life because of the difference in the spectator position necessary to understand and analyze these performances. Specifically, I would suggest that while *Chevy* and *Slag* both seem to be performing outside of the gendered norms in Second Life, only *Slag* actually is able to approach transgressive performance, a stepping above and beyond the contained boundaries of this ritual performance.[205]

In the interviews I conducted with the participants in these ceremonies, the words "love," "commitment," and "soulmate" came up the most often. In the 129 wedding videos I analyzed on YouTube, those words were mentioned in sixty-seven percent of the videos. The wedding participants I observed think of this ceremony as a demonstration of love between two people, regardless of whether that couple is heterosexual or homosexual. They do not look upon marriage as a ritual that inscribes gendered performance. Therein lies the secret to both the societal matrix and habitus. In order to be sure gender appears stable, a societal grid must remain in place, governed by economic, social, and cultural norms. Habitus erases these norms from conscious performance, making the performance seem to be about love and romance. Romance hardly lasts in

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[204] Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 8-9.

[205] Victor Turner, *Anthropology of Experience* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986), 4.

Second Life, so these declarations of love are not for committed relationships but for committed performance. Gender rules the marriage ritual.

The same regulations that hold residents in gendered positions on the societal grid pull back those performers that step outside of proper ritual performance. After committing for years to a feminine performance, *Chevy* revealed her user's biological body and asked to be placed on a position on the grid that would read female avatar/male user, but society associates this position with deception within relationships. After the ceremony, society placed economic pressure on *Chevy* through the shops on her sim. Social pressure pushed her out of control of her group of friends and colleagues at the Chateau. Eventually, *Chevy* caved to the cultural pressure to have an avatar body that wouldn't be involved in deception, changing not only his current form but completely rewriting his history in Second Life. Society wanted to see a picture of a male avatar holding *Barella* in a wedding photo, and that picture now hangs at the Chateau de la Rose.

While it may seem counterintuitive, virtual society is placated by a ritual performance that demands a committed, gendered performance. *Chevy*'s example shows that deception still exists. She did commit to a marriage prior to her ceremony to *Barella*, one in which she fully committed to her female avatar form. Society was comfortable with this arrangement. *Chevy* gave no indication of wishing to deceive as long as she kept her user far from the world. That distance is what drives the marriage ceremony. Residents want to see a stable gender performance inworld, and the marriage ritual lashes its performers to a legible, positioned performance.

CHAPTER 5

BIRTH CONTROLS: RESTRICTING MOTHERHOOD

Society deemed birth performance necessary after prim babies became popular objects in the new virtual world. Without any regulations, these objects attracted performances free of the signs of biological reproduction. Male avatars could pick up prim babies and call themselves "mothers." The exploration of this potential confronted residents with the anonymity of the user, and the possibility of a gender-switching avatar mother became a very real possibility. As the new society carefully crafted the positional grid for performance, they rejected this potential for all residents to perform motherhood. The volatile avatar body presents a challenge to the accepted first-life biological binary, male/female, and rather than allow for gender play, Second Life residents reversed their general acceptance of creativity and codified this virtual performance.

To regulate this performance, residents gradually created economic, cultural, and social constraints on the performance with the prim baby. These constraints kept the avatar body from performing motherhood in ways outside of the male/female biological binary as well as binding performers to that binary. One of society's first choices for regulation came in the form of family relationships. By making the prim baby a part of a larger family dynamic, Second Life residents connected the avatar body to close, intimate relationships already under the control of habitus. According to those invisible rules, residents must avoid deception in these relationships at all costs. To further ensure that these relationships remain gender stable, virtual doctors and midwives train in the

necessary components necessary for this ritual, guiding avatar mothers through the components necessary for the performance. Their high level of involvement ensures that anyone wishing to perform birth and parenthood fits with the biological pattern of first life and commits to a gendered performance inworld.

Birth works to control family intimacy in Second Life. Within this social world, residents sought out close friendships, and some of these resulted in close relationships where one resident might begin calling another avatar mother, father, or some other title given to family members. Birth ritual not only works to place the body of the avatar on the positional grid, but it simultaneously forces the female avatar body into a ritual demanding a high degree of economic, cultural, and social commitment. This chapter explores these levels of commitment and traces the development of these regulatory strands. To begin with, I will examine the regulations in place to keep the female avatar in the birth ritual dedicated to a gendered performance, followed by a discussion of the avatar doctor/midwife as the high priest designated to watch over the birth ritual. Finally, this chapter inspects the work of *Ciera Spyker*, an avatar mother who slipped through the regulatory strands and consistently pointed out society's regulation of the female body.

Economic, Social, and Cultural Controls Over Birth

Birth ritual in Second Life differs greatly in the setting and outcomes of the performance from the biological event in first life. The user's biological body is masked by the interface of the Second Life platform. Any performance of birth in the virtual world is disconnected from biological function. Virtual birth ritual is not a life crisis ritual as it is in first life, but instead, the ritual redresses a societal schism created by a

crisis.[206] When the prim baby arrived inworld, society was forced to consider the problems caused when anyone could be allowed to claim motherhood. This societal schism resulted in the need for a ritual to solidify the commitment of the female resident to keep gender in check. At the same time, this crisis also pointed to the unstable avatar body within family relationships, and the ritual simultaneously demands a stable performance of gender to help keep gender-switching avatars from disrupting the social world. Ritual formulated the performance required, and in the process, birth became a high-bandwidth warranting performance that keeps gender in the virtual space regulated and controlled.

In order for an avatar to give birth, the avatar's body must be programmed to behave in a way that mimics pregnancy. Residents have written scripts to place a prim baby, which is in essence an object, inside the hollow of the digital body and have it appear between an avatar's legs as though an avatar is giving birth. The baby is simply an object, yet after the elaborate conception performance needed prior to the birth, the avatar mother refers to the object as a child, one that must be cared for and attended to daily. To establish this illusion, residents have created multiple items for performances of continuing motherhood: scripts, animations, shapes, clothing items, furniture, and HUDs that work within this birth process. Each of these items costs Linden dollars, and while the ability to build each of these items is still available to all residents, maternity clinic doctors and midwives guide birth performers toward buying existing products. In doing so, these practitioners reinforce the established cultural capital surrounding these objects,

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[206] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Experience* (New York: PAJ, 1987), 39-41.

and since society gives cultural capital to items deemed acceptable according to habitus, these objects reinforce the gendered grid positions and the binaries associated with them. Pregnant body shapes, for example, are given a high degree of cultural capital within the birth ritual, and at the same time, these particular body shapes only work with the female avatar body mesh, reinforcing the importance of only female avatars being allowed to give birth. Similarly, maternity clinic workers press ritual performers to purchase conception HUDs, fashion, and accessories that highlight the femininity of the female avatar body, once again demanding an economic commitment to items that connect the performance with a position (female) on the societal positional grid.

Each birth performance requires an economic investment from the participants. In total, a Second Life birth costs between twenty and one hundred dollars US, not including any accessories for the child after the birth is completed. While not a large sum of money, the ritual demands a higher economic commitment from its performers than most activities in Second Life. Midwives and doctors suggest and require specific items holding the highest cultural capital for the performance, and their presence during all phases of the performance adds a measure of social commitment as the avatar mother performs for the virtual medical professionals.

This high level of commitment is a continually evolving code that becomes more rigid with each year. At the beginning of my field work for this dissertation, I expected to find a wide variety of birth performances in Second Life. From earlier research in 2009-2010, both from observation inworld and textual performance in YouTube videos, I witnessed a ritual rich in variety and complexity. My field research in 2012-2013, however, found a highly codified system that regulated and managed virtual birth.

Originally, I intended to observe twenty births as a means of sampling what I assumed to

be a varied performance type. After ten performances at four different maternity clinics, I

recognized that all of the performances I was observing were eerily similar. The current

commitment required from each birth performance narrows the potentials to a single

model, yet at the same time, the midwives and doctors coax avatar mothers into viewing

their births as completely unique.

Part of how these virtual medical professionals control the performance is through

their reliance on Pooterbilt birth animations. When I first observed births in 2009, many

different animations were available in clinics, including some programmed by the clinic

doctors themselves. In today's world of Second Life birth, as *SnowAngel Wonder* said in

the midwife training I attended, Pooterbilt is "the only option for people who give a

damn. It is the only thing to use."[207] While several types of birth animations still exist on

the Second Life Marketplace, a website where virtual objects can be purchased and sent

to avatars inworld, in the top twenty maternity clinics in Second Life, only Pooterbilt

animations are used.[208] *Pooter Belfire* used motion capture for these animations, meaning

these animations most closely approach mimesis of the biological event of birth. His

dominance of the market regulates how avatars are allowed to perform birth because of

the high cultural capital his animations hold. Other animators, including two of the top

animators in Second Life based on sales and store traffic, told me that they pulled their

[207] Medical school class session, August 14, 2013.

[208] Based on a search of Second Life maternity clinics with the highest traffic within the

Second Life program, May 2013.

own animations as it became clear that people were only using Pooterbilt items. Since *Pooter* only makes his animations for female avatar body mesh, his dominance of the market means that any avatar wishing to give birth in the most frequented maternity clinics must do so while committing to a female avatar.

Pooter Belfire sells both the animations and medical equipment programmed with the animations, so maternity clinics can either use the equipment as is or place the animation on their own sims in any area they want. Fantasy births are popular, so many clinic owners will place the animations in specially-built areas. Giving birth under a waterfall, in a luxury bedroom suite, or even in an igloo is considered normal. The actions of the avatar mother, however, remain exactly the same in each of these birth scenarios. Whether in a tiger cage or in a replica of a hospital room, avatar mothers use exactly the same animations in each scenario. The animations have streamlined the birth ritual to the point where the performance is homogenized. The setting may change, but society has settled on how and when the avatar mother will use animations and how doctors and others will respond to those animations. When a female avatar performs a contraction animation, for example, she must also type out or speak out using the voice function to indicate that she is experiencing pain. Virtual doctors are trained to coach a mother with subtle hints to perform the pain of contractions the avatar's user isn't experiencing.

Each animation in the performance lasts for a certain period of time, so as the ritual progresses, using Pooterbilt animations means each stage of the performance lasts for exactly the same amount of time every time a female avatar gives birth. The doctor and the mother do have to manually choose when to proceed to the next stage of birth.

The Pooterbilt HUD asks the mother to decide when the prim baby's head and shoulders will appear as well as when the child is completely out of the womb, yet doctors are trained to tell the mother when to press the buttons and to understand how to keep the performance moving along. While it appears on the surface that the mother is in control, the doctor/midwife is actually the one controlling the timing of the performance. The labor portion of the ritual in the ten births I witnessed differed in length by only thirty seconds, despite the need for ten individual users to press the buttons during the birth process. To accommodate the length of the animations, the avatars portraying the doctors and midwives have streamlined their own performances to make sure each birth works within the time frame of the animations provided, and these virtual medical practitioners are trained carefully to ensure that the performances are kept within socially acceptable limits. If an avatar mother places herself in the hands of a maternity clinic, she commits to a birth where the socially accepted high priest of the ritual guides her through a proper and complete performance. When society tightly controls such a ritual, it reduces the possibility of gender surprise because of the high social commitment needed to convince the doctor/midwife that the performance is sincere.

After observing births for a period of time, I undertook a new investigation to help understand the position of these doctors and midwives. During the initial birth observations, I noticed that "help wanted" signs at virtual birth clinics listed a requirement for a Second Life medical degree. Upon further investigation, I discovered that there are three medical schools currently operating in Second Life. I enrolled

anonymously at one of these three schools.[209] This further research helped me to

understand the role of this high priest of birth ritual in the rehearsal and warranting of

female avatars giving birth. These virtual medical practitioners are trained to give female

avatars the most realistic first-life birth experience in the virtual world. To do so, they

must regularly and, in many cases, invasively connect the female avatar body with first-

life female biology.

Societal norms require this period of training because of the complicated quality

of the birth performance today. These performances take place over an extended period

of time in Second Life. The usual gestation period for a virtual baby is six first-life

weeks. Throughout this time, the mother avatar goes through medical appointments,

Lamaze classes, and preparations for the baby that continually demonstrate both her

knowledge of virtual societal norms as well as a dedication to the performance of

biological motherhood under the supervision of the doctor/midwife. These appointments

include what would be invasive medical procedures in first life: weekly pelvic exams

(including a recommended pelvic exam on the day of the birth), blood tests, and

ultrasounds. Each of these examinations presumes the presence of organs inside the void

of the avatar mesh body. An ultrasound, for example, uses equipment that shows a

picture of a fetus inside a fully functioning womb despite the fact that everyone in the

room is fully aware of the fact that the digital body is empty inside. The pregnant avatar

must respond correctly to any procedures during each of these appointments. During a

pelvic exam, for example, the doctor is trained to ask the mother if she's feeling any

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[209] As a requirement of my IRB, I will not be naming the school or its participants.

discomfort if she doesn't respond after the speculum is inserted, eliciting a response to sensations the biological, not the avatar, body should be feeling. If she imitates the first-life biological body correctly, the doctor/midwife praises her performance, reinforcing the deportment for an avatar mother. Society asks female avatars to commit to a gendered, biological performance at each of these appointments leading to the birth. At the beginning of birth performances in Second Life, this longer performance didn't exist. Avatars could simply buy a prim baby and begin calling themselves mother without the gender warranting of a birth performance, meaning that men, women, and genderless fantasy characters could take on what is a distinctly female role in first life. Today's performances compel a gendered performance from those avatars participating, and in doing so, the rules of the performance stabilize the suspect female avatar body by regulating it into the societal matrix of gendered performance.

Motherhood and Iconic Imagining

The earliest mention of prim babies in the Second Life forums occurred in 2003, but motherhood and parenting references do not begin until 2005. Between 2002 and 2010, there are 1411 threads referencing babies, pregnancy, motherhood, or maternity.[210] The conversations about prim babies begin with talk about what place they would hold in Second Life society, as demonstrated by *Andie Apollo* and her plea to keep babies out of boxes. By 2005, the forum postings begin to show a shift. While prim babies are the

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[210] This statistic came from a survey of the Second Life Forum Archives, cross-referencing search terms with specific thread titles. For further information on the search techniques employed for this forum, see Appendix B.

focus of the early threads, 2005 is the year that residents began offering advice on pregnancy shapes and animations. Prim babies change from being discussed as new objects in the world to ones which demonstrate the highest possibility of iconic thinking. In 2005, for example, a forum thread on prim babies talks about the specific scripts that allow the babies to cry, giggle, and play.[211] In the same thread, the prim babies are connected with pregnant avatars and biological sex: "I knew it!! That whole story about two avatars loving each other very much and using [sexual] pose balls really doesn't have anything to do with making prim babies, does it?"[212] At this point, this resident connects biology to the baby by jesting, but by 2009, the same kinds of comments are made unironically. *Lin Difference* writes "can some please tell me how to get rid of my virtual pregnancy. i was in the middle of the 'act' when i received a message saying i was pregnant. it also said i need to take a pill if i don't want it. can someone please tell me how i can get this pill."[213] *Lindal Kidd*'s blog reinforces this biological cause and effect.

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[211] Jim Levy, "Baby Buyers Beware," *Second Life Forum Archives,* May 6, 2005, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/a8/45412/1.html.

[212] Zuzu Fassbinder, "Baby Buyers Beware," *Second Life Forum Archives,* September 28, 2005, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/120/a8/45412/1.html.

[213] Lin Difference, "Help-pregnant," *Second Life Forum Archives*, September 26, 2009, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/10/342005/1.html.

She begins her how-to guide with a discussion of Second Life sexual techniques including the best accessories to simulate virtual menstruation and fertility.[214]

While most of the avatar mothers I interviewed gave birth during the final period when birth had become highly codified, *Kendra Keegan* stands apart in her performance because she started performing motherhood in 2004, a year and a half after Second Life opened to the public. She is the last person to buy an original *Andie Apollo* baby before that resident left Second Life. *Kendra* met her partner, *Bob*, on the first day she arrived inworld in July 2004, and it didn't take her long to find *Andie* and start thinking about starting a family in Second Life. At the moment, *Bob* and *Kendra* have more than forty children she has given birth to. In our interview and when I watched her give birth to a prim daughter she named Darla, she spoke of the children and the process in a distant way, never approaching the kind of iconic thinking that requires absolute commitment to a belief in the prim baby as anything other than an object. She could step away and observe her performance from the user's position. There was no sense that she was confined to viewing the performance from only one perspective. *Kendra* would speak of her prim babies as objects, not as biological children who needed to be attended to. She would talk freely about the prim baby needing to be taken out of her inventory, handing "it" off to *Bob*, and discussing the merits of one style of baby over another. She

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[214] Lindal Kidd, "How Does Babby Grow?," *Across the Grid with Lindal Kidd Blog*, November 10, 2011, http://acrossthegridwithlindal.blogspot.com/2011/11/how-does-babby-grow.html.

referenced laughing at her early births. She even mentioned letting her first-life children watch her avatar give birth "like a funny movie."

Not only did *Kendra* think about the prim baby as an object, but others around her talked about the baby from a non-iconic standpoint as well. She said that other avatars laughed at her in 2004 when she carried one of her babies around, but she was laughing with them.

> [11:16] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): they laughed at us
>
> [11:16] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): the baby made noises
>
> [11:16] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): not like a real baby
>
> [11:17] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): more like a doll
>
> [11:17] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): it was really a funny looking baby but cute in a way
>
> [11:18] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): not sure if I still have it
>
> [11:19] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): i do remember is was a girl

In *Kendra*'s mind, the prim baby is an object. The critical difference in this performance of motherhood is the reaction to the object. *Kendra* laughs along with those around her. She is not absorbed in her roleplaying as contemporary residents are, evident from the way she forgets the object's supposed biological sex. She exhibits non-iconic thinking, an understanding of the object as part of the play, not having substance of its own. These objects are symbols of play, ones she always recognizes as symbols.

Since *Kendra* was one of the first avatar mothers in Second Life, she witnessed how motherhood and birth were performed through the many changes in the world, and her perspective can help shed light on why her playful performance is so rare in Second

Life. Her first babies were purchased. She didn't give birth until 2007. Her partner, *Bob*,

told her about the animations, and after he told her about the newest clinic in Second

Life, "we rped [roleplayed] the pregnancy and went to a clinic and gave birth." *Kendra*'s

use of the word roleplaying is unusual. Residents who are curious about birth talk about it

being roleplay, but those who give birth use verbs that place them in the imaginative

state, making it closer to a fully immersive performance that is less like *playing* a role

and more like *being* a role. *Milli Santos*, for example, posted in the forums that she was

uncomfortable with virtual birth but wanted to hear from people why they would enter

into such an activity:

> Do they roleplay it out? Do they rolelay their period beforehand and the
>
> post natal depression afterward? Do they actually get another player to
>
> roleplay their child? How does all of this work?
>
> I'd really love to hear from people who have done it. Please please don't
>
> hammer me. I'm asking the questions so that I might get a better
>
> understanding. I acknowledge my ignorance, I don't embrace it.[215]

Imnotgoing Sideways responded to *Milli*'s question by explaining why roleplayers

stay in character:

> For some people *points at self* SL is full time role play. Breaking
>
> character is even more unnerving than it seems. Even for the people
>
> around us. I mean... Why not? We've had enough reality for the day and

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[215] Milli Santos, "Having a Baby in SL," *Second Life Forum Archives,* April 2, 2008,

http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/cf/250624/1.html.

> SL is a good dose of fantasy to begin with. How would you feel if the cutest little cherub waltzed right up to you and started cussing like a sailor and ran on about cigarette preferences?[216]

Imnotgoing describes the iconic mindset. A roleplayer steps into a fantasy he is one hundred percent invested in performing. A player feels that any outside influence that steps outside of the play violates the protected world of the imagination, interrupting the enjoyment of the space. Contemporary Second Life birth requires the kind of commitment needed to maintain a fully iconic position in roleplaying, a social commitment to perform the role of "mother" in the company of other "players." *Kendra*, however, derives as much enjoyment from the process of giving birth without the iconic mindset. From her spectator position, both outside and inside Second Life, *Kendra* and her user can see the performance as open play. Today's birth performance demands that the roleplayer more firmly invest in the resident spectator position, a way of ensuring that avatar mothers must invest in social interactions in order to claim the title of mother. *Kendra* feels free to joke about her performance and memories, while the player *Imnotgoing* rejects the outside forces. Using Massumi's example of the soccer game, *Kendra* is the player who runs up and down the field with the soccer ball like the others but tells stories of the days when everyone played without rules or boundaries. When a resident spectatorship is maintained during roleplaying, the iconic status of objects becomes naturalized. The birth roleplayer doesn't think about the constructed nature of

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[216] Imnotgoing Sideways, "Having a Baby in SL," *Second Life Forum Archives,* April 2, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/cf/250624/1.html.

the prim baby or the birth animations, because the outside influence of the user's spectator position is temporarily quieted while inworld.

Birth changed from being a casual performance surrounding an object into being a roleplaying activity in Second Life, a curious categorization considering the fact that other types of roleplaying in Second Life (vampires, Wild West, alien worlds) generally involve a narrative performed in specific, private areas. Birth performances moved to private sims just like weapons roleplaying sims. The pregnant body became a symbol of roleplaying that was rejected by this society in public areas because it broke one of the cardinal rules of the world: not imposing on someone else's freedom to perform as he wishes. *Milla Alexandre* talks about how pregnancy bothers her, even though she herself is a roleplayer: "My problem is not so much that people do it......it's that I'm not in it to role play....I am myself....I do not like to be looped into someone elses fantasy.....having to play along so their little world is seamless."[217]

Milla equates being pregnant as the equivalent of one of the Wild West roleplayers showing up at a shopping mall, firing his pistol, grabbing her, and riding off with her in the saddle. Similar reactions simply don't happen to other roleplaying communities, but avatars who perform pregnancy are placed under suspicion. They occupy an interesting liminal space. These avatars are in the midst of a committed, gendered performance that regulates them to the social grid. Before the performance is

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[217] Milla Alexandre, "Having a Baby in SL," *Second Life Forum Archives*, April 2, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/cf/250624/1.html. Ellipses present in the original.

complete, however, that avatar body has not yet demonstrated a commitment to that gendered performance, leaving it untamed within the societal grid. By presenting their bodies in public areas, they force other residents to acknowledge the potentials that birth claims to regulate. The pregnant avatar is a symbol of the possibility of gender play that existed before the ritual regulation was put in place, and society's unease cannot be set aside until the performance is complete.

Since a great deal of unease surrounds that body because of the veiled biological user controlling it, I suggest that roleplaying designation is a way of placing the birth performance in a place where it can be controlled within the virtual space. Roleplaying is known to have specific rules. When arriving on a roleplaying sim, each avatar receives a notecard filled with the necessary rules. Placing birth in this category indicates that those performing such births must follow the rules for the roleplay. Birth clinics, however, do not present their rules in the same way as a gunfighter sim. Rather than posting a list of rules, they use societal pressure to reinforce social norms that demand a performance of biology, and the doctors and midwives become society's representatives overseeing the performance.

One of the understood, naturalized norms is the necessity for a female avatar body. In 2006, Chris Dahlen, a freelance reporter, did a series of articles based on his experience giving birth in Second Life. The clinic he used was one of the very earliest inworld, and while the owners told Chris that the animations "work for both female and male avatars," he decided that "the clothes look funny on the latter, so I made a brand-

new female avatar that looked like me — if I had long red hair and a generous pelvis."[218] The male mesh avatar body has wider shoulders and thinner hips than the female avatar, and when the abdomen is extended, the male protrusion sits lower than the female mesh belly bulge. If birth is to be connected to biology, the performance has to mimic first-life bodies, and the male avatar body doesn't present the right look for the performance. While Chris gave birth during the middle period when norms were still being fashioned, meaning the male avatar body was still allowed the chance to give birth, the connection of the performance to biology through the animations of birth began forcing the user to evaluate which avatar body (male or female) was right for the performance. Although men and women began playing with prim babies when they first arrived in the world in 2003, by 2006, this male user felt the need to create a female avatar to perform birth because the shape of the body only gave a "realistic" performance with a female mesh body.

As Chris's story suggests, male users could use female avatars to give birth, and within the new familial relationships in Second Life, such performances could give way to mothers revealing male user bodies. Other practices were needed to keep the performance of motherhood both gendered and contained. What that meant in practice was a control over the female body during the birth performance. Kendra told me the story of her first birth and how she was in a public sandbox when her water broke:

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[218] Chris Dahlen, "I Was an Online Mother," *SF Weekly News*, April 12, 2006,

http://www.sfweekly.com/2006-04-12/news/i-was-an-online-mother/full/.

[11:29] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): it was funny we were sitting in the sandbox and my water broke on the ground

[11:29] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): all the guys started yelling

[11:30] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): did you pee yourself

[11:30] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): lol

[11:30] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): a preggers woman in labor scares men

[11:30] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): I was so embarrassed

[11:30] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): the hud admonishes you to go to the hospital at that point

[11:31] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): I had no idea it would beak like that

[11:31] Kendra Keegan (kendra.Keegan): we were laughing so hard that i almost forgot abt the hospital

At that point in Second Life history, a prim textured to look like water would fall from between the pregnant avatar woman's legs to the ground, representing her water breaking. A woman's water breaking in first life is a biological event that isn't controlled by a device, but in Second Life, *Kendra*'s HUD and its scripts not only broke her water but also told her to go to the hospital, something the avatars around her would hear in open chat.[219] By doing so, the HUD informs the residents around *Kendra*, accepting of

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[219] Before 2009, the ability to script a HUD to speak to an avatar privately didn't exist: this feature was introduced in the Second Life viewer update in October of 2009. See

the performance or not, that an imitation of a biological event is happening. Other avatars would have to log out or intentionally move away from the group in order to avoid the performance. The water-breaking event happens within seconds, which doesn't give observers the chance to walk away before the performance is complete. The resident spectators must come to terms with the pregnant avatar and her user through their acceptance or rejection of the birth performance.

For Second Life users, first-life warranting behaviors are already programmed into their lives through habitus. When a first-life biological body doesn't conform to that warranting standard, significant societal repercussions occur. Thomas Beatie, a transgender man who carried three children with his wife, faced numerous doctors who refused to treat him, one of whom even insisted that he shave his beard prior to birth or the doctor wouldn't deliver the child.[220] T. Benjamin Singer puts forward the notion that seeing a body like Beatie's creates a "terror of boundary collapse," an extension of the limits of how we view a body that is both male but able to do what "only" female biological bodies can do. This inability to go past societal limits on the body "generates uncertainty and confusion even on the part of sympathetic and well-intentioned

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"History of Second Life," *Second Life Wiki*,

http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/History_of_Second_Life.

[220] Paisley Currah, "Expecting Bodies: The Pregnant Man and Transgender Exclusion from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3 and 4 (2008): 300-6.

providers."[221] In the virtual world, the boundary collapse isn't over a bearded man asking for medical care. Instead, the terror Singer speaks of derives from the uncertainty about the user controlling the female avatar body.

Kendra's experience with birth provides some clues to how society seamlessly put boundaries in place to ensure that the kind of terror Singer talks about could be kept at bay. In the beginning of prim babies, people would make objects that looked like babies in the public sandboxes where avatars would gather. *Andie Apollo* very freely made and gave away children to friends. As time went on, however, babies and birth experiences were put under the control of the market in Second Life. Around 2008, *Kendra* and *Bob* decided to stop giving birth sometime around the birth of her twentieth child:

> [11:41] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): it got costly
>
> [11:41] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): 3500 for baby
>
> [11:41] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): then the clothes and furniture
>
> [11:41] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): and this place [the birth clinic they regularly used for about a dozen births] was very busy
>
> [11:42] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): then it became mondain like an assembly line birth
>
> [11:42] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): so we stopped using them

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[221] T. Benjamin Singer, "From the Medical Gaze to Sublime Mutations: The Ethics of (Re)Viewing Non-normative Body Images," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 616.

Despite *Kendra*'s experience using the many different HUDs and pregnancy products,

she became aware of how pregnancy and birth became an industry. Her assessment that

the event is costly has to be considered from a Second Life standpoint. 3500 Lindens

equals $14.18US.[222] While startlingly cheap compared to first-life birth, very few items

in Second Life cost more than three or four hundred Linden dollar**s.** The price of a baby

and birth package is about the same as a 6500-square-foot mansion, so in virtual terms,

Kendra is correct in her assessment that giving birth is costly.[223] Placing the birth

performance in the same category as big ticket items in Second Life builds the illusion

that birth is something to invest in, not something to be purchased lightly or on a whim.

As the market pushed birth from the free and open creation of the early days of prim

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[222] The Linden dollar is exchanged as currency. This pricing reflects the exchange rate on

May 19, 2013. See "Buy L$," *Second Life Homepage*,

https://secondlife.com/my/lindex/buy.php, May 19, 2013.

[223] At the time of this writing, 3810 mansions are for sale on the Second Life Marketplace

website. Of those, more than two-thirds are cheaper than 3500 Linden dollars. The fully-

furnished Driftwood Mansion, for example, boasts 3 bathrooms, 5 bedrooms, a pool with

accessories and animations, a dining room, library, working ceiling lights, an indoor

movie theater that connects to several online movie services, and two sitting areas for

only 2399 Linden dollars, the equivalent of $10.51 US. See "The Driftwood Mansion,"

Second Life Marketplace, https://marketplace.secondlife.com/p/The-Driftwood-Mansion-

Furnished/3076538, May 19, 2013.

babies, the performance became economically regulated to the upper level of spending inworld.

The increased investment in monetary terms correlated with a more significant investment in time. In her early births, *Kendra* was pregnant on her own, only going to the clinic for the birth itself. The other avatar mothers I interviewed started their performances at a maternity clinic much earlier, about four to six weeks before the actual birth. None of these mothers complained about the investment of time. They described their visits as "routine" and "necessary to be sure you have a healthy baby." For the first birth after her hiatus, in 2010, *Kendra* noticed changes in the birth process. Rather than waiting until the day of the birth, she had a much closer relationship with the doctor at the birth clinic.

> [11:47] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): she is like a rl doctor
>
> [11:47] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): the weight u take your bp
>
> [11:47] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): listen to the heartbeat
>
> [11:47] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): ask you how your feeling
>
> [11:47] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): got an ultrsound last week
>
> [11:48] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): she is very detailed

The visits were no longer limited to the birth itself, but included ultrasounds, pre-natal visits, and the possibility of needing to head to the clinic for an "emergency" generated by the pregnancy HUD. These events were wrapped into the idea of imitating the biological body in the interest of deepening the experience of virtual motherhood, and a "professional" was in place to guide the avatar body through that performance.

At the same time that the investment in the birth performance increased, society also asked avatar mothers to invest time in the care and nurture of their prim babies. Instead of being put away when the avatar mother is no longer interested in performing motherhood, the prim baby itself requires care and nurturing. Zooby, currently the biggest seller of prim babies in Second Life, began offering fully scripted babies that can grow from a newborn to a toddler through a series of forty-eight stages in 2011. In her website description of these objects, *Carrie Tatsu*, the creator, states that "Zooby Babies will grow, learn and develop over time if you offer care and love. The experience you have with your baby is intimate, but can be shared with family and friends."[224] Just as the first-life mother demonstrates love and care for her child by providing for basic needs, a Second Life mother using a Zooby baby shares her performance of care and love with other avatars but in a highly scripted way. Zooby babies grow through the stages after mothers keep up with their needs. Parents can purchase bottles, vitamins, toys, cribs, and love hearts that keep the baby's development meter progressing.[225] Each baby has a happiness timer of twenty-four hours. In that time, food, hygiene, rest, love, and diapers are on separate meters that must be kept at one hundred percent. To be a good performer of motherhood, in other words, the avatar mother must purchase and use items specific to the child as a demonstration of her commitment to the role.

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[224] Carrie Tatsu, "A Parent's Guide," *Zooby's* website, May 22, 2013, http://www.zoobys.com/babies/.

[225] Carrie Tatsu, "Zooby Babies Happiness," Zooby's website, May 22, 2013, http://www.zoobys. com/babies/happiness-food.html.

Kendra herself has used Zooby babies and loves the roleplaying, but she still speaks of them as objects rather than investing in the play itself. In the case of the other mothers I interviewed, the Zooby babies become their children, not objects. The corresponding birth experiences are described as special events that grow "naturally" from a committed relationship with a Second Life husband. These birth rituals represent the contemporary birth performance. Steeped in iconic thinking, the avatar mother performs the necessary set of biological functions dictated by her chosen birth clinic and animations in a way that seems to progress seamlessly from other intimate relationships, namely marriage. The naturalization of the birth performance results in performers who are unaware of the rigidity of the codes within the ritual. *DJ Tanzalia*, for example, told me from the first moment I sat down to interview her that her birth would step outside other births I had seen: "I understand what your tyring to accomplish, but what will happen at my birth will be different because its all ours." Married in Second Life to *Dan Silentghost*, she also told me quickly after meeting that she was also in a relationship with *Dan* in first life. "I don't know what we'll be able to tell you. We're just a couple of ordinary people."

Why did *Tanzalia* believe her story was so unique in the world of Second Life pregnancies? In the objective view of her story, it's hard to see how she could believe that her pregnancy was anything outside of the usual. Her birth took place at the RRB Maternity Clinic, one of the top five clinics in Second Life. While she picked the birthing center for the "individual approach to each birth," she freely told me that she had opted for a birth package that included standard Pooterbilt animations and a set of prescribed doctor visits. The "doctor" for her birth claims to be a first-life Ob-Gyn, but as *Tanzalia*

admitted, there is no proof for that claim. The same doctor also sports a diploma from a Second Life medical school, the same one I attended, something that seems superfluous in light of her supposed first-life medical degree. The baby *Tanzalia* purchased is the same as every other baby sold under the product name, yet still she insists that her birth is completely different from every other birth out there.

One answer to that question lies in the way prim babies have been coded into culture as symbols of gendered relationships rather than simply objects. As already mentioned, *Andie Apollo* made the first suggestion that babies should be treated as something more than mere prim objects, but she also attempted to connect the prim baby with love and relationships: "As I started to create a baby in Sl, it was only because I love babies, but I didnt know this could be a new revolution in the world.SL is a place to make all our dreams true and I am so lucky to see how much happiness and love can be , just being parents."[226] *Andie* believes that her babies represent a steady, happy relationship between two people. She offers a free baby to one of her detractors on the forums and his Second Life partner as a way of demonstrating how these objects represent love.[227] Supporters of *Andie*'s work talk about how each baby was individually made with the couple in mind, even if the changed details were so miniscule that each baby looked the same without very close inspection.

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[226] *Andie Apollo*, "Babies in SL!" *Second Life Forum Archives*, July 17, 2004, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/18/15/17946/1.html.

[227] Ibid.

As babies became connected with relationships and love, the objects simultaneously entered the cultural conversation about how gender could be verified within Second Life. Babies were given to couples, meaning that society began to examine the kinds of relationships that would be allowed to have prim children. In a response to one of *Andie*'s baby announcements, *Merwan Marker* stated he would start a daycare center for "single parents, dual parent, extended, blended, same gender couple parents."[228] *Merwan* effectively says that a gendered relationship is needed for parenthood, even in the virtual space, because of the explicit way he connects parenthood to family relationships. Extended families would include grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and other gendered roles, while the word blended suggests single parents (a gendered role of either mother or father) coming together to raise children. Society connects familial roles with the first-life biological roles necessary for parenthood. While researchers like Sherry Turkle celebrate the genderless avatars that can exist in virtual worlds, this early conversation about babies shows that its residents look for ways of gendering such performances, taking away the potential for birth performances by placing them firmly in the realm of the known, the culturally intelligible body.

In today's Second Life, Zooby babies take on this gendered, iconic position in the lives of current avatar mothers. The scripting has become a way for avatars to show they can live up to the role of motherhood, even though that role is entirely based in a script written by *Carrie Tatsu*. She markets her product as a convenient way to have a family in

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[228] Merwan Marker, "Babies in SL!" *Second Life Forum Archives*, July 17, 2004, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/18/15/17946/1.html.

the virtual world: "Becoming a parent in Second Life can be quite confusing and nerve-wracking, just like in real life. But it doesn't have to be! Zooby's Babies aims to make this experience as painless and enjoyable as possible with this simple guide to beginning your journey as a family."[229] The word family indicates the relationships connected with the object, and while those relationships can be heterosexual or homosexual, they cannot step outside of these known, gendered relationships. *Carrie* may have created the scripts for the babies to be painless, but what the scripts do is demand the same performance from each mother: an extended dedication to feeding, playing with, and taking care of an object in the company of others to demonstrate being an effective mother.

The difference between contemporary avatar mothers and someone like Kendra lies in the way they view the object. The other mothers I interviewed talked about how much work it can be to be a part of a family in Second Life. *Sirena Mondrian* told me that she sometimes wishes she could take a break from the work of being a mom, but she knows that "being a mom means being there." During her interview, *Sirena* kept the baby on her lap the entire time, playing with it and talking to it. Of the ten interviews I did, only two didn't have the prim baby present at some point during the interview. Of the two who did not, one explained that her husband was watching the baby. The other, *Kendra*, seemed completely unconcerned about showing me the baby or even pretending that she needed to demonstrate she was a mother by performing motherhood for me. For

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[229] Carrie Tatsu, "Zooby Baby Essentials," Zooby's website, May 22, 2013,

http://www.zoobys. com/babies/essentials.html.

contemporary avatar mothers, society demands a committed performance that extends to all circumstances, regardless of the inconvenience the performance may cause.

Kendra's lack of motherhood performance stands as a curiosity in the world of contemporary Second Life birth performance. Rather than performing motherhood for me, she spoke of the babies and the performance as objects and play, something she could walk away from at any time without repercussions. *Kendra* plays with Zooby babies in Second Life, for example, but she isn't controlled by the baby and its needs like other avatar mothers.

> [11:43] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): then I saw a zooby baby and I was in love again lol
>
> [11:44] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): now we have 15 zooby babies
>
> [11:44] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): and expecting twins right now LOL
>
> [11:44] Kendra Keegan (Kendra.Keegan): they're a handful but you can always put them back in your inventory

Kendra's casual reference to putting the babies in her inventory demonstrates how she views the Zooby baby: an object that can be put away, as a doll would be put away on a shelf. Just putting a child away, however, doesn't satisfy society's need to stabilize the gendered performance of the avatar mother. To do so, society had to wrap a set of values around the object to keep birth from being casual. By 2007, residents were debating the ethics of a prim baby, connecting the object with biological life and its ethics:

> what are the moral implications of deleting a prim baby? Come to think of it, what are the moral implications of ending an avatars "life"? Personally,

I can see great value in having prim babies and things such as nursing

anims (being a nursing mom myself in RL), I can see such things being

indespensable for things such as online parenting support etc. But for an

accessory? Seems to me there are a few too many parents in RL that feel

that way about their kids.[230]

What this resident is discussing is the importance of seeing the prim child as a symbol of

a biological life with the same commitments and needs as a first life child. The

performance of birth and motherhood, therefore, must include the necessary elements to

show that the performer understands the deep connectedness to the biological event of

birth and all of the gendered roles associated with that event. In a virtual world, however,

this value seems ridiculous when looked at objectively. A prim baby is just an object. It

can be scripted to cry, sleep, wake up, and imitate other biological functions, but it is as

sentient as a rug or a chair. This poster takes the position that the digital object suggests

moral implications for taking its life, yet there is no life to begin with. Additionally, this

post connects maternity to a first-life female body with the reference to nursing, and in

the process, she also hints that anyone who doesn't have that first-life biological

connection is just looking for an accessory, an object to use in imagining. Second Life is

supposed to be a place where any dream can become a reality, and the original builders of

prim babies were exploring the possibility of fashioning an object of imagination. For

these residents, the iconic thinking surrounding avatar motherhood results in an inability

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[230] Jeude Mills, "Pregnancy and childbirth in SL," *Second Life Forum Archives*, July 23,

2007, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/d5/199273/3.html.

to acknowledge the methods that went into the development of their performance. Instead, valuing and caring for life becomes a value associated with the birth performance.

Kendra still understands the creative processes behind the performance. She has built her own clinic with some baby items of her own, so she continues to be aware of the object-ness of the symbols of the ritual and her own ability as a creative force to shape her performance of motherhood. Contemporary avatar mothers are more concerned with the values behind the performance, a demonstration of the way habitus has formed around the limiting of potentials surrounding birth. Residents looked to first-life birth as the model for the birth performances that arose inworld, connecting the performance to biology in an attempt to regulate who could give birth. Martha L. Fineman says of first-life motherhood that it "has always been, and continues to be, a colonized concept—an event physically practiced and experienced by women, but occupied and defined, given content and value, by the core concepts of patriarchal ideology."[231] The female avatar body practices and experiences avatar birth, but a handful of creators gives the performance its symbolic value. Societal norms contain the female avatar body and its performance. In first life, as Adrienne Rich says, "Women are controlled by lashing us to our bodies."[232] The biological body controls women in first life because society regulates

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[231] Martha L. Fineman, "Images of Mothers in Poverty Discourses," *Duke Law Journal* 1991, no. 2 (1991), 290.

[232] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1986), 13.

how those bodies can behave, especially within the confines of motherhood. In a world where such bodies do not exist, avatar bodies with uncertain users behind the screen can be lashed into gender-legible performances by the same processes and procedures that regulate first-life motherhood. Rich says, "All human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spend unfolding inside a woman's body."[233] Second Life society reached for a similar goal by ritualizing birth to ensure that the performance of the woman's body would remain consistent, and items such as the Zooby baby keep motherhood performed in such a way that the body in the ritual can be read as female, the perfect mother.

When *Kendra* first began giving birth, the ritual process was open. The birth animations did not exist, and even when they began to enter the marketplace, no clearly defined process dominated the performance. Her avatar body was not lashed to a biological model in her early performances. She was not required to have anyone present at her birth. She could control the animations on her own and give birth at home. As the ritual became codified, she went to a clinic for care by a doctor, the high priest that emerged to preside over these performances. Second Life society has encouraged the rise of the medical profession, placing doctors in the role of the high priest of ritual, watching over the performance, coaching the participants, and guiding each element so that gender is codified. My own experience as a medical student illustrates how birth ritual is passed on and enforced to new practitioners.

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[233] Ibid., 11.

Medical Schools, Doctors, and the High Priest Role in Birth

In her examination of first-life birth, Robbie Davis-Floyd hypothesizes that the medicalization of birth has turned contemporary Western birth into ritual. Medical procedures are modeled in such a way that mothers-to-be become helpless performers constrained by the elements of the ritual.[234] Her findings echo Rich's assertion that "the orthodox assumption [is] that the gynecologist examining a supine woman in stirrups on a table should be more familiar with her reproductive system than the woman herself."[235] Second Life birth rituals similarly place the female avatar body under the control of procedures, ones that are carefully watched over by avatar doctors trained to perform the ritual. Just as first-life medical procedures take away the agency of the mother, the avatar doctors take away the individuality of birth performances and distinctly warrant the performer's body. Society determines the performance's meaning, not the performer.

As the societal representatives, doctors and midwives must be carefully trained to oversee the gendered nuances of birth. Society gives these virtual medical professionals authority to control the ritual only after a long training process. Birth clinic owners are specially trained in using the Pooterbilt HUDs necessary for birth, correctly performing the steps for pre-birth medical procedures, and coaxing the best performances from a mother. At the same time, the values behind the performance are subtly transmitted to the

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[234] Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 234-40.

[235] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, xi.

new doctors and midwives, giving them a basis for the decisions they make in their practice.

Second Life has three medical schools who "officially" train midwives and doctors to conduct births at their clinics. Hillman University states its medical program "covers all of the second life HUD of conception, Medical Role Play, Clinic Management, SL ethics, and other topics of priority for medical doctors. In the six-week program students will also intern and take a midterm/final exam. This is a combination of in class lectures and lab/homework assignments."[236] Advertised as approaching first-life standards, this school and others like it train those assisting in Second Life birth to use the HUDs that control the performance, regulating how those objects are used within the virtual world. Thinking back to 2003 when the world started, no schools existed, and the ways in which birth could be performed had many more potentials. Hillman University and places like it represent the end of the cultural consideration of all the potentials of birth. Rather than allowing for an individualized birth experience, the dynamic interactions of residents constrain the practice to a set performance.

In the ten births I observed, the ritual followed several stages that remained consistent to the point of occasionally being mirror images of each other: the preparation and announcement of the impending birth, waiting for labor, transportation to the maternity clinic, the performance of labor and birth, the return home, and the introduction of the child to friends. Most importantly, the birth performance itself seems to follow a

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[236] SnowAngel Frenzy, "Hillman University Programs," *Hillman University Website*, May 23, 2013, http://hillmanuniversity.yolasite.com/programs.php.

specific script. Rather than being the personalized, magical experience for a couple, these births are nearly identical. At each point during this process, the high priest oversees and directs the performance.

The avatar schedules the day for labor with the maternity clinic, so the day of the performance is planned far in advance and with the high priest's approval. A few hours before the labor begins, the female avatar's close friends come to her home or a place of her choosing to sit and talk before the ritual occurs. The doctor or midwife is in private contact with the avatar mother during this period via private messaging, making sure she is ready to teleport to the maternity clinic when the doctor tells her it is time to do so. While the high priest remains in control, this part of the ritual gives the illusion that the female avatar is going about her daily life before the subsequent labor arrives. Since biological birth is unpredictable, this part of the performance creates a sense that the child can come at any second and ties the avatar mother into performing as though such a biological event is unplanned and surprising. All ten of the avatars I observed feigned surprise that the moment had finally arrived for the prim child to be born, and an elaborate send-off happened as the partners stood and prepared themselves to teleport to the maternity clinic.

Once at the birth center, the doctor and nurses rush the mother into the birthing area. Whether a sterile medical environment or a fantasy area, the medical professionals make an elaborate display of hygiene and sterilization of instruments. This performance reinforces society's value placed on the prim baby by connecting the sterile environment, necessary to preserve life for the first-life medical event, to the birth. During this sterilization process, the mother sits on either an exercise ball or a chair to go through a

series of contractions, animations built into the ball or the chair. At this point, the animations show the female avatar body in pain. Her body contorts, and her head falls back. The doctor is trained to ask the mother if she is in pain and to rate her pain on a scale of one to ten, similar to the way hospitals in first life measure pain and respond with appropriate medical procedures. Doctors are trained to message the mother privately if the performance isn't quite right. In medical school, we were taught to react to mothers who too quickly suggest a level ten in pain. As my medical professor suggested for this scenario, "You just need to talk them down, calm them down. They probably just nervous, but you can't let them get into it too fast. Keep the experience flowing."[237] In other words, in order to connect the body completely with the biological function of motherhood, the pain level needs to begin somewhat lower, something that the doctor or midwife can subtly suggest in private messaging, away from the eyes of the other observers in the room.

The doctor and the mother determine when to move on to the next phase of labor, which then begins in earnest. The doctor suggests in a private message that the mother should press the button on the HUD to begin labor, and when she does so, the HUD begins to announce the contractions she experiences in regular intervals determined by the script. The mother moves to another area, usually a room with a table with stirrups, to activate the birth animations. Again, the doctor is suggesting all of these actions either in open chat or through private messages. A small display on the mother's screen lets her control the animations for when the prim baby appears between her legs, but it is the

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[237] Medical school class, September 3, 2013.

doctor who tells her when to push the buttons. *Melaina*, one of the midwives I observed, explained to me in a private message that most people going through the birth animations get nervous when each stage of birth lasts too long. "Sometimes they jus wantt to get it over with," she said, "And if it lasts to long they dont know what to say as its happening." One of the reasons that birth performances last a similar length of time is because of the doctor's intervention in this part of the performance. By telling the mother when to push the buttons on her screen to keep the birth moving, the doctor controls how the performance progresses.

After the prim baby moves out of the female avatar mesh body into the space between her legs via a motion script, the doctor or midwife roleplays cutting the umbilical cord and delivering the afterbirth. The mother then holds the child, any friends present congratulate the couple, and after a short rest period, the family teleports back to their home to take photos of the newborn prim baby. There is often a party where the newborn mother, now free of her pregnancy shape, takes to the dance floor with her partner and child, enjoying the strenuous dance animations while proclaiming how sore her body is from the process. The emphasis remains on the female body. Throughout the ritual, the animations and the required performance ties the female avatar body to the biological one.

Not every avatar that undertakes birth in Second Life can be verified as controlled by a biologically female user. In fact, in seven of the ten births I observed, there were no first-life connections via voice performance or pictures of the user at all. Those seven residents may or may not have a female biological body in first life, but they committed to the presentation of their avatar bodies as female, gendering themselves through a

performance requiring time, money, and effort to achieve. Birth rituals in this virtual world ease the disquiet of the veiled biological body. By conforming to the expectations of the performance, the female avatar commits to the gendered performance. Most importantly, there is always a person observing and verifying that commitment to the gendered performance: the doctor overseeing the birth. To understand this role, I enrolled anonymously at a Second Life medical school and took the six-week course to become a certified virtual medical doctor. By taking these classes, I uncovered a number of requirements for the birth performance masked by simply observing the ritual.

On my first day of class, all of the students were told that we had to have a microphone and be comfortable using voice. One student dropped out immediately, and the professor remarked that she feels such people are "shady" and generally come for some purpose other than "helping people." Our professor needed to verify our user bodies consistently throughout the course, meaning that each new doctor had to demonstrate a consistent, gendered performance as a high priest. As we verified our biological bodies, each one of us was given the stamp of approval as being trustworthy and reliable not because of our medical skills but because of our willingness to verify our biological bodies. While the biological body is itself an unstable marker of gender, Second Life society is reassured when the biological body appears to match that of the avatar.

The six-week course focused on how to "help" people have the kind of birth experience they expect while avoiding behavior that could be viewed as "shady." In this context, the expected birth experience follows the pattern of the ritual, a "twice-behaved behavior" that reperforms the already anticipated sequence of events to reinforce the

desired behaviors.[238] To be sure that the performance conforms to expectations, virtual doctors have to be trained to perform medical functions inworld, such as pelvic exams, ultrasounds, and the delivery itself, so that the behaviors in these ritual components emphasize the cultural values behind the performance and keep the high commitment to the performance. Not using voice when requested suggests that an avatar is hiding something. A warrant is demanded, and if it isn't given, residents assume a deception is being perpetrated. In my interactions with other medical school students attending the other two inworld institutions, voice is required of all medical school graduates in Second Life. In order to perform a ritual of warranting, the high priest's body must be confirmed. During class, when my professor mentioned that many women were uncomfortable with male avatar doctors, I remarked that they could always change to female avatars. The professor quickly rebuked me, stating that an ethical doctor "is who they say they are."

After we had been warranted, our professor then taught a variety of medical procedures that examine and scan an avatar mother. For each procedure, whether taking a urine sample or giving an ultrasound, we were required to create what she termed "emote cards," carefully crafted scripts we could use for each patient. Rather like a one-sided play, these cards anticipate the mother's performance and set out each step of the performance in order. We then turned in each of these cards to the professor to be corrected and approved. Performances by "licensed" doctors are, therefore, verified as correct before being performed by female avatars. If the mother steps outside of the

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[238] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36.

expected performance, our medical professor encouraged us to get her "back in line" and not to be afraid of "walking away from something you don't think is right," referring to performances where the mother is simply uncooperative.

One of the biggest surprises I experienced with my medical school enrollment was the amount of time and effort it would take to complete the course. Class met three times per week for three hours each session, and the amount of homework was consistent with an undergraduate course. An essay was due for nearly every class, and research on the parts of the body and their functions would be assigned before the long weekend. At one point, my homework consisted of 1000 words on each of the body's systems as well as diagrams of each system. While each student's purpose in attending was to take on the job of medical doctor in Second Life, the homework included all aspects of pediatric and wellness care for the mothers.[239] On top of the already intense schedule of classes and homework, the school also requires ten internship hours with a working clinic in Second Life. The emphasis was on the repetition of the performance after watching others already approved to perform birth.

Rituals, in the words of anthropologist Michael Coy, are "nested in the logic of the production processes and in the articulation of the specialization with the social organization of society," and these performances must be taught through repetition by the

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[239] Curiously, male avatars and fathers were rarely considered during our class time. The professor declared in one class that fathers rarely come in for any medical services, and if they did, we were instructed to treat them "just like the females."

apprentice after observing the master practitioner at work.[240] Either in a classroom setting

or in the performance of the actual task, the master teaches his students the norms of the

performance as well as the potential problems that might be encountered.[241] Victor

Turner describes this sort of training as a time when an apprentice's "own wisest

predecessor [has] sought to order, explain, explain away, cloak, or mask…mysteries and

difficulties."[242] After the apprentice has successfully assimilated these problems, the

master judges his performances to determine if he demonstrates mastery, at which point a

"cloak of competence" is passed from the teacher to the student.[243] The apprentice may

not necessarily know or understand every aspect of the performance, but the cloak masks

any performance deficiencies with an understanding that she has completed a set of tasks

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[240] Michael William Coy, "Introduction," in *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again,* ed. Michael William Coy (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 2.

[241] Jack Haas, "The Process of Apprenticeship: Ritual Ordeal and the Adoption of a Cloak of Competence," in *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again,* ed. Michael William Coy (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 87-105.

[242] Victor Turner, *Drama, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 242.

[243] Jack Haas and William Shaffir, "Taking on the Role of Doctor: A Dramaturgical Analysis of Professionalization," *Symbolic Interaction* 5, no. 2 (1982): 187-203.

that place her in a class above the average person.[244] A doctor with the cloak of
competence gives the illusion of social legitimacy in every performance.

In their dramaturgical analysis of first-life medical students, Haas and Shaffir
trace the similarities between ritual apprenticeship and earning the cloak of competence
from the medical establishment:

> As the neophytes begin rehearsals, they are handed professional symbols
> (language, costumes, and props) that help identify them in their roles but
> also present challenges of manipulation. As they begin to improvise before
> the drama directors and other cast members, they experience uncertainty
> about how to learn and play the part. It soon becomes clear that what is
> expected on practice stages is the development of convincing and
> trustworthy performances that must impress legitimating audiences,
> present and future.[245]

My experience in Second Life medical school mirrors the apprenticeship of a first-life
doctor in the way that my professor used apprenticeship to bind my performance.
Immediately upon enrollment, I was handed a set of scrubs, a blood pressure cuff, a
syringe, and a stethoscope programmed with animations that I needed to "practice,
practice, practice" with, according to my professor. My classmates and I struggled with
these new items, looking incompetent as we took our first steps as virtual doctors. Each

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[244] Robert B. Edgerton, *The Cloak of Competence* (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1993).

[245] Haas and Shaffir, "Taking on the Role,"188.

week, one of the class periods was a "lab," a time when we improvised a variety of medical performances. This time showed us how to play the part of a doctor in the medical performances. Our work was critiqued openly for its authenticity, and we were expected to make progress toward our final exam, a delivery where our professor took the place of the patient.

While these practice performances helped us get our sea legs when it came to how the ritual worked, the discussions in class alerted us to the issues that would help legitimize us as doctors for current and future performances. My classmates and I, for example, energetically debated whether prim baby abortion was ethical in Second Life. Remembering that prim babies need to remain an object of imagination for birth to be a necessary performance, these debates serve to reiterate the socially acceptable position of the object as a biological entity, masking the norms that keep it in that place. By reinforcing societal expectations surrounding the prim baby through these discussions, our performances as doctors would reflect the expectations for the performer. Each student was required to turn in a code of ethics at the end of the course, a culmination of our thoughts on these discussions. This code serves as a final example of the student's dedication to the "ethical" issues surrounding babies and families in Second Life.

The culmination of my medical education was a secret ceremony at a Greek temple near the school. Each new avatar doctor, dressed in a toga, took the Hippocratic oath. In the context of this performance, the professors linked Second Life medicine with first life. The cloak of competence handed to us in Second Life appears to come from the age old traditions of Hippocrates, despite the fact that the bodies dealt with in the clinics are made of pixels instead of blood and bone. The dean of the school made it clear that

the oath was specially arranged to pertain to Second Life medicine, and the oath itself points to the gendered issues within this ritual. Drawn from the contemporary first-life Hippocratic oath, the Second Life version omits several key phrases, changes certain phrases, and includes references to virtual impossibilities. This oath reveals the gendered nature of this performance and the underlying societal norms governing virtual birth.

The text of the oath begins with, "Will you apply to the benefit of the sick all measures that are required, avoiding those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism?" From the beginning of the oath, the emphasis falls on the biological body and the possibility of disease. There is no sickness in Second Life. An avatar can pretend to be sick and visit a doctor, but the possibility of overtreatment simply doesn't exist. If I, as a certified Second Life medical practitioner, gave a patient fifty Valium pills to take once a day to treat a common cold, absolutely nothing would happen, either to the avatar or to the user behind the digital body. Similarly, therapeutic nihilism cannot be avoided in this virtual space. Treatment of disease *is* impossible because the underlying causes do not exist. While some might contend that this starting phrase is necessary for avatars wishing to play pretend as doctors, I would argue that this immediate emphasis on the body reinforces what had been taught throughout the course: Second Life doctors must understand and treat the digital body as though the biological systems of first life remain in place in the virtual world.

The second phrase of the oath states, "Will you remember that there is an art to Second Life medicine as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy and understanding may outweigh the surgeon's knife or the chemist's drug?" There certainly is an art to Second Life medicine, the art of performance. Doctors must learn the right phrases and

the correct order for the animations, but the science behind the performance is computer science, not biological science. That distinction isn't made clear in the medical training or the oath, reemphasizing the performance of biology while masking the technology. The third phrase of the oath emphasizes the community backing the doctor: "Will you not be ashamed to say "I know not," nor will you fail to call in your colleagues when the skills of another are needed for a patient's recovery?" As new doctors, we had already been called in to be a part of our new colleagues' training, watching and observing their performances. The doctor's social commitment mirrors the demand for the avatar mother to commit to the performance in the social environment. The patient's recovery is never an issue in this virtual context, but the social commitment to a gendered performance is at the heart of the ritual.

The fourth phrase confounds at first reading: "Will you promise not to play at or pretend to be God?" In Second Life, everyone appears on the surface to be a godlike creator with the ability to alter the world around them at will. On closer inspection, however, social norms have tightly regulated the world, keeping residents from fashioning performances outside of the acceptable parameters. This phrase of the oath serves a different purpose than its first-life counterpart. Rather than preventing a doctor from playing with life, this phrase asks the virtual doctor to agree to be both the regulated and the regulator. Doctors who take this oath are agreeing to keep to the values and performances set forth in the virtual medical school and to not play with developing practices outside of the ones deemed socially acceptable.

The oath ends with the following phrase:

Will you prevent Second Life disease wherever you can, for prevention is

preferable to cure, and will you remember that you remain a member of

Second Life medical society with special obligations to all fellow human

avatar beings, those of sound of mind and body as well as the infirm?[246]

Notice that the oath ends with a connection to "fellow human avatar beings," finally

connecting the biological and the virtual together. After all of the work to become a

Second Life doctor, the practitioner is charged with caring for both the avatar and the

user, the virtual and the biological. In melding these two separate bodies, the avatar body

is bound by the same gendered behavior as first life, eliminating the possibility of a

gender-switching performance that challenges gender.

This Second Life Hippocratic Oath leaves out two important phrases from the first

life version of the oath: protecting the privacy of patients and honoring scientific gains in

medicine. Nothing about Second Life birth is scientific in the biological sense, and since

the object of the birth ritual is to mask the non-biological nature of the digital body,

calling attention to science could unravel the carefully constructed performance. Without

the patient privacy clause, the performance can be put under social scrutiny, observed and

judged for its adherence to the gendered requirements. High priests of birth ritual in

Second Life are under no obligation to keep silent if the performer doesn't meet the

requirements.

The apprenticeship to become a doctor in Second Life helps to reinforce and

maintain the performance of birth as well as to solidify the importance of keeping the

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[246] Medical School Graduation Ceremony, Second Life, September 7, 2013.

ritual. The female avatar body needs to be kept under control, and in order to do so, medical doctors must be trained to keep the birth ritual flowing according to the guidelines that force a commitment to a gendered performance. In a world where no avatar can die, biology becomes important only in this birth ritual, and the doctor stands in place to make sure that every mother conforms to the correct performance. Yet I encountered a female avatar who became her own high priest, rejecting the necessity of societal norms for birth. *Ciera Spyker* turned the cultural norms of Second Life around, and in the process, she highlighted the unstable nature of gender in birth performance.

POP—Pregnant on Parade

"My name is *Ciera Spyker*, and I win."[247]

As with everything connected to *Ciera Spyker*, the opening line of her profile announces this avatar is someone to be reckoned with. A builder, a scripter, and the biggest pregnancy activist in Second Life, *Ciera* was born into the virtual world on February 29, 2008. In less than a month, March 25, 2008, she was calling herself the "Preggo Goddess" on the forums and asking for advice on how to put texture on the prim breasts she had purchased. Her prim breasts were one of her most recognizable features. Enormous, bursting out of the thin bikini tops she favored, *Ciera* started pushing the limits of the avatar body from the moment she first rezzed in the world. Each avatar body comes with the ability to adjust a number of physical traits, and while breasts set at one hundred percent are large and look like plastic surgery gone wrong, some users wanted to

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[247] *Ciera Spyker*, Second Life profile, available through the Second Life viewer and search function, accessed May 12, 2013.

take the avatar body even further by attaching specially shaped prims to the body to make the breasts even larger. The prims could be as large as the user wanted, and *Ciera*'s were the largest possible, about the size of first-life basketballs strapped onto her chest. Just like her appearance, *Ciera* was larger than life, and as she became the "Preggo Goddess," she threw the societal regulations surrounding pregnancy into disarray. Instead of having her avatar body lashed to her user's body, Ciera's performance kept slipping through the social regulations surrounding pregnancy. She played with economic, cultural, and social regulations to parody the instability of the emerging birth ritual.

  Ciera Spyker moved into this culture with no intention of either warranting herself or shying away from the appearance she wanted. Her large breasts were just the start of a body that confounded the community. Rather than fashioning a female avatar body that went along with what people would consider "normal" in Second Life, thereby avoiding the suspicious questions large breasts raise, she took the avatar body to its extremes, dancing on the edges of what had been deemed culturally appropriate by Second Life standards. Her giant breasts were like a neon sign in the habitus of Second Life: This avatar may be run by a male user! *Ciera*'s body stood as a site of suspicion, a sign that may suggest further warranting is needed to believe the user behind the avatar actually has a biologically female body, but *Ciera*, in her performances, never seemed to feel the need to warrant herself at all. Despite the cultural pressure to change her body or reveal her user's biology, she continued with her original enormous breasts without any sign that she wanted to ease the suspicion around her body. Instead, she seemed to revel in keeping people guessing about who was at the controls behind the screen. One way she skirted the warranting issue was through her profile information. Walther and Parks state that

information within a virtual environment can stand for a low-bandwidth warrant, a way

of testing whether the facts of an avatar's life match with what's being said.[248] If a person

claims he's from California, for example, then that person should be able to answer

questions about what happened when an earthquake hits near his area. Such information

can be verified through conversation without user-to-user contact in first life, giving it

low-bandwidth warrant status. *Ciera*'s profile shows no sign of giving truthful

information, but the effect is to call the entire warranting process into question. Her

profile lists the following information about her first life:

> Do I have big boobies? Yes I do, I have 825/840cc implants, and I'm
>
> blonde. I used to be bigger on top but I downsized a few years back. I'm
>
> just a F cup now. I may yet upsize again. IDK [I don't know].
>
> Deal with it.
>
> I love my peeps here and in real life.[249]

This information gives the illusion of warranting *Ciera*'s first life body, but in reality, it

calls it even more into question. Knowing the size of breast implants could indicate

knowledge of breast augmentation and the sizes available, a point for *Ciera*'s female

avatar to be connected to a female body. But the size of both the first-life and second-life

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[248] Joseph A Walther and Malcolm Parks, "Cues filtered out, cues filtered in: Computer-
mediated communication and relationships," *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*
eds. Mark L. Knapp and John Daly (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002),
529-63.

[249] *Ciera Spyker*, Second Life profile.

breasts pushes the boundaries of what is considered beautiful and acceptable in either world. Since large breasts are viewed with suspicion in Second Life anyway, residents shake their heads at the concept that someone would wish to walk around sporting such accessories. She slips between what could be true and what seems blatantly false, all the while never seeming to care what other residents might think of her. The cultural regulations normally surrounding the avatar body seem to have slipped off of *Ciera*'s digital body, and she danced away from doing the culturally acceptable thing to being a body that disrupted the habitus of how a body should appear.

Her interactions with other residents continually vacillated between what should be socially acceptable and the blatantly parodic. In perhaps the most infamous example of this skipping between reality and fiction, she wrote what some residents called a manifesto outlining some her first-life details in the summer of 2009, which seems to dare residents to guess at the user behind the screen:

> I am a professional escort. I have been a mens magazine and film model since 1991. I have been on the cover of almost every magazine in the adult world at one point or another.
>
> My bust line has been as large as 34HH and just 115lbs at the peak of my career, but I've scaled myself down as I've gotten a bit older. I'm currently around 5-4ish 32ddd 24 37 140 And I will admit sitting here between work gigs playing SL rather than walking down to the hotel gym has put on about 5lbs. this past year.
>
> Maybe its being 35 yrs old now. Either way I'm OK with it. (I have one client who said he'd pay me 100k to gain 200lbs.--mmm I think I'll pass)

I have had maybe 3000 men in my life and quite a few girls as well. I've worked with avg. joes and Washington power brokers and even Ron Jeremy.

I know every interstate and high end hotel from coast to coast. Most doormen know me by first name and I tip very well. Most know exactly what I do and protect me in return for a favor now and then, its how it works. Im told lots and lots of secrets that most people will never hear.

I have friends in the UN, I once was a "friend" for a member of Bushes cabinet. I have many people watching over my safety and well being and am set till the day I die .

I still work now when I have a extra extra special need or want, but mostly I spread my time between my home now and my love for animals. I travel a lot. Overseas, and throughout the Americas. I owned/adopted a elephant but she died when I was back home last spring. (She was in Thailand) Thats the time I went nutso here in sl and deleted sims... sorry. I was really upset.

I have seen things most of you will never even dream of. Some were wonderful, other things are that of the very darkest of humanity imaginable. Yes I've seen it all. I have a couple years of college in but I found early I could make 6 figures a year dancing and never looked back. Most women hate me, Guys crash their cars to watch me walk down the sidewalk.

Umm

> I speak my mind.
>
> I do what I want.
>
> I don't care what others think.
>
> I am Ciera Spyker.[250]

The information in this posting fluctuates between the credible (gaining weight as she

gets older) to the fantastic (being the mistress for a Bush cabinet member). Her writing

style constantly keeps you guessing whether the fantastic might be, in fact, reality. Some

posters to the forum expressed disbelief that Ciera owned/adopted an elephant, yet other

pointed out that her reference to the period in her avatar's life when she deleted many

buildings and items in a fit of rages seemed reasonable after losing a beloved pet (even if

it is an elephant). In the thread in which this diatribe was posted, some people leapt to

Ciera's defense while others unabashedly and sarcastically declared her a liar. One poster

went so far as to respond to her manifesto with: "I think in honor of this thread, we

should all make up completely implausible stories about who we are and what we have

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[250] Reposted at Second Citizen, an independent forum operating outside of Linden Lab's

control. *Ciera Spyker* edited this original post in the forums and deleted it, but her arch

enemy, Briana Dawson, reposted it in a thread on Second Citizen. See Briana Dawson,

"This is still pissing me off and i had to spread it…," *Second Citizen Forums*, August 30,

2009, http://www.second

citizen.net/Forum/showthread.php?s=1177af9c7cdb616269df43bdcf4e726a&t=980;

Briana Dawson, "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy," *Second Life Forum Archives,* August 29,

2009, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/99/337007/3.html.

accomplished."[251] That poster, however, missed the point of *Ciera*'s performance: to reveal the fact that almost everything in the virtual world is an implausible story. Rather than accepting society's rules that made implausible performances seem normal, such as an avatar giving birth, *Ciera* played with the very same rules. Second Life society values anonymity, yet it also wants to reveal what's behind the screen. By posting her manifesto unveiling her "true" first life, *Ciera* demonstrated that she understood the way to win the game but had no intention of playing by society's rules.

She also played with the cultural capital assigned to objects related to the birth ritual, demonstrating again the instability of the performance in the virtual world. *Ciera* bought several sims soon after her arrival in Second Life and built them to be areas for what she termed "pregnancy play." These businesses collectively were known as POP – Pregnant on Parade, and as the name suggests, nothing about POP was designed to be hidden or private. Every part of pregnancy in this sim was designed to be in the spotlight. By this point in Second Life's history, maternity centers were well-established businesses, but the demure, modest, private clinics had nothing close to the antics at POP. *Ciera* could build and script, but what she chose to work on constantly amazed and confounded the community. Creativity is the highest form of cultural capital in Second Life, so fashioning new objects for the world should be viewed positively. *Ciera*'s work, however, was scoffed at and belittled. One of her most ardent critics labeled her a

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[251]Trout, "This is still pissing me off and i had to spread it…," *Second Citizen Forums*, http://www.secondcitizen.net/Forum/showthread.php?t=980&page=4.

"Frankenbarbie" who only knew how to create monstrous things like her.[252] Her stores were chock full of pregnancy objects, but not the kind featured in the demure clinics found in other areas of Second Life. Rather than a pregnancy shape that tried for a realistic look, her shapes included a prim belly, a huge protrusion to match the enormous breast prim attachments. If *Ciera*'s breasts were the size of basketballs, her pregnant belly approaches the size of a yoga ball. If the largest maternity shape in other clinics might make an avatar look like they're having twins, *Ciera* and her customers looked as though they were having seven or eight babies at a time. To top it off, the activities and recreational areas at POP were distinctly different from the animations and activities pregnant avatars could find in other areas of Second Life. While maternity clinics sell animations that, for example, let a male avatar lovingly caress a pregnant female avatar, *Ciera* built a morning sickness toilet. Even the way she advertised her products was very different. She advertised the morning sickness toilet in the forums this way:

> Im pregnant again in SL and I realized I needed a place to um, upchuck in. SO I made a neat littel toilet and a animation for throwing up into it. Theres no mistaking what your doing while your on your knees in front of it.
>
> POP INDUSTRIES has one currently on display for sale on VERONA.

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[252] Briana Dawson, "Frankenbarbies," *Second Life Forum Archives*, September 8, 2009, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/f6/338936/1.html.

its cute, and if your a pregnant female in SL you NEED this item.[253]

Compare *Ciera's* ad to the Rock-A-Bye Babies Maternity Clinic, one of the most popular maternity clinics in Second Life:

> Having your baby should be private and in luxurious accommodation's-
> Your package will include a realistic sweet tummy talker-Weekly Prenatal
> exams and 13 Options of delivery. All labs and Sonograms and Lamaze
> Classes! Pregnancy is a very special time for families and you simply
> deserve the best ! Our Real life Medical Staff will guide you and give you
> hands on one on one care that you should expect! Prices are affordable and
> Packages are inclusive! Rock A bye babies where miracles happen every
> day!.[254]

Ciera's advertisement is based on necessity, not on the luxury promised by the Rock-a-Bye Babies Maternity Clinic. Her work takes the pregnancy performance from one of halcyon perfection to something more realistic, a performance that more closely approximates first-life biology than the one dictated by Second Life society. In doing so, the ad reveals the societal mechanisms in place to make birth seem natural in the distinctly unnatural digital space. Rather than using words like "luxurious" and "private," *Ciera* emphasizes the upchucking and throwing up of early pregnancy by calling it

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[253] *Ciera Spyker*, "Morning Sickness?" *Second Life Forum Archives*, June 26, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/198/52/267395/1.html.

[254] Advertisement sent to members of the Rock-a-Bye Babies Maternity Clinic in Second Life, April 17, 2013.

"cute." She knows that society gives cultural capital to pregnancy items to make the avatar body perform birth, but she crafts items that shrug off the added social regulations attached to the items. The morning sickness toilet isn't intended to be private or luxurious. It is as though she took the biological body that Second Life society wanted to lash her avatar body to and instead playfully tied a knot with that same regulatory strand.

The Rock-a-Bye Babies ad, on the other hand, uses the regulatory strands in exactly the way they're supposed to be used: to coax a female avatar into a committed performance. Michel Foucault describes the docile body as a subject that takes on specific acts with a self-discipline that shows he has embodied the practices of society and can make them useful.[255] Rock-a-Bye Babies advertisement lulls the female avatar into performing in private and with guided assistance to perform birth perfectly. *Ciera Spyker*, throwing off any illusion of docility, performs in public and in a way that eschews any guidance from the larger virtual society. Foucault's docile body assumes a subject who takes responsibility for keeping her own sexual practice in line with societal rules. A female avatar going to Rock-a-Bye Babies Clinic is assured she will be able to purchase a package with the guidance she needs to perform according to social norms. *Ciera*, in contrast, shows no interest in having her own performance of sexuality and maternity align with anyone's views but her own. There is no high priest to oversee a mother using the morning sickness toilet. Female avatars that joined *Ciera*'s pregnancy

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[255] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 135-69.

troupe did so on their own, with no one to tell them whether society would accept their performance.

What's curious about this addition to the pregnancy performance repertoire is the discord it causes within Second Life culture. As Thomas Malaby noted, the Lindens early in the life of the world pushed for work that they deemed less trashy, and the culture gradually shifted to accommodate more sophisticated texturing and sculpt tools that showed an idyllic kind of realism.[256] Realism became the standard of beauty and perfection for objects created within Second Life, and those things that made life realistic were praised and lauded. The morning sickness toilet, while a realistic object, makes a clear point about the separation of the biological body of the user and the digital body of the avatar. *Ciera* emphasizes a biological need in the creation of the morning sickness toilet, but the need is housed in a digital body. I would suggest that *Ciera* is turning the warranting process on its ear. Her morning sickness toilet shows knowledge of pregnancy, which could suggest a connection to a first-life biological body, and her understanding of the cultural push for realism demonstrates her ability to work within the culture. Yet the morning sickness toilet shows a realistic picture that steps outside of the idealism that goes along with Second Life. *Ciera* is working with the tools of the Second Life program, but her work references the earliest days of Second Life and the objects, a time before social norms had regulated pregnancy.

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[256] Thomas Malaby, "Command Lines: The Emergence of Governance in Global Cyberspace," *First Monday* 11, Special Issue no. 7 (2006), http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/ article/view/1613/1528.

Her performance points out the trace of what came before, the potentials that were left behind. Pregnancy started as a playful, creative activity without the necessary accoutrements of birth and ritual. As the culture began to create the animations and clinics to house birth performances, birth became tightly controlled within the parameters of social and cultural norms. The gender of the avatars in the performance, at the same time, became tightly bound with the ritual, effectively sealing off the ability to reveal a first-life self that is other than what the digital body might imply. Pregnancy in Second Life is already a parody of the first-life biological event, but *Ciera*'s insistence on tying it to the seamier biological functions in pregnancy acts as a warrant (by tying the avatar body to a knowledge of the first-life biological body) but also parodies the idealism of Second Life culture, drawing suspicion. In other words, while others were becoming good priests of the birth ritual, *Ciera Spyker* insisted on stepping outside of the box and performing pregnancy and birth in ways that went against the new rules being assigned to the birth performance. Other maternity clinic doctors and midwives were fashioning an idealized birth performance they carefully controlled, but *Ciera Spyker* turned those visions around and reminded society that avatars are free to build any performance they desire. Her pregnancy performances made people face one of the critical differences between first-life birth and virtual performances of the biological event: the absence of the biological body. In doing so, she pointed out the precarious position birth ritual should hold in Second Life and the farcical nature of virtual gender construction.

The morning sickness toilet was only one of many objects, animations, and performances that made *Ciera* stand out from the rest of the pregnant avatars in Second Life. POP seemed like a sim designed to parody all aspects of Second Life. *Ciera* started

with a dance club, called the Tortoise Club, featuring pregnant dancers with huge breasts. The dancers would gyrate on poles, their extreme prim bellies and breasts knocking against both the poles and the tortoise who stared at the patrons and dancers alike. These dancers were actively exploring a potential in SL: to have the pregnant body perform in ways that are biologically, socially, and culturally impossible in first life. With their enormous swollen bellies and breasts, these dancers writhed in the same way as non-pregnant exotic dancers in Second Life, but their breast and belly attachments made their movements appear stiff and unusual. Prim attachments don't move fluidly with the body because they remain independent of the avatar body mesh. A prim is attached to a specific part of the avatar mesh body, like the left hand, the stomach, the neck, or the head. If a ring is attached to the left hand, when the left hand moves, the ring will move as well. Prim bellies and breasts are more difficult to attach realistically. A prim belly attached to the stomach is connected a single point on the avatar mesh, so when an animation sends a signal to move a nearby body part, like the avatar's hips, the attachment remain stiff and unmovable in contrast to the body moving around it. As the dancers put on their show, their mesh bodies writhed sensually, but their bellies and breasts seemed to almost separate from them because they lacked movement. The size of the attachments was one aspect of the parody, but the fact that they didn't move with the avatar body pointed out the obvious: the avatar body was not a biological body but a constructed object. *Ciera*'s dancers put their avatar bodies into active animations that vigorously moved the mesh part of their bodies and highlighted the stiff prims designed to represent a pregnant abdomen, highlighting the fact that these are objects, not biological parts.

Possibly with the intention of foregrounding the absence of biology, *Ciera* designed objects and events in two categories: some that mimic first-life pregnancy in non-idyllic ways and bizarre, outrageous designs that go far beyond first-life capabilities. The first category directly parodies the carefully constructed performances in other maternity clinics by reminding Second Life residents of some of the less desirable physical aspects of pregnancy. *Ciera* was the first builder, for example, to create a Lamaze mat that pregnant avatars could use to practice their breathing before their delivery.[257] Avatars don't require oxygen, food, or any of the other biological functions to survive, so this reference to the original biological body mocks the performance of birth with its obvious difference. There's no need to prepare for pain when no pain is in the avatar's future. As mentioned earlier, Lamaze is now used as a rehearsal period for birth, an appointment where a high priest watches over the pregnant avatar's exercise. *Ciera*'s mat didn't feature the smooth, calm yoga animations of the current Lamaze classes. Pregnant women moved into difficult, nearly impossible yoga positions. The sight of a pregnant avatar in a handstand is quite remarkable. This yoga mat emphasized first-life biology by suggesting that yoga is good for a pregnant mother, yet it quickly flipped that same suggestion on its ear by making the yoga exercises too strenuous for a heavily pregnant woman.

Her birth animations, similarly, emphasized the pain of pregnancy in a way that moved toward realism, the Second Life ideal, yet also stepped outside of what virtual

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[257] *Ciera Spyker*, "lamaze mats and animations," *Second Life Forum Archive*, August 1 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/198/5a/274145/1.html.

society had begun to deem correct about the birth performance. When an avatar agrees to

enter into the birth ritual, her behavior is marked and controlled by friends and family for

a set period of time. With clinic check-ins, interactions with staff at those clinics, as well

as conversations with friends and virtual family, each pregnant avatar has her actions

scrutinized for an extended period. With so many opportunities to demonstrate

knowledge and understanding of the first life biological body, this ritual takes on a high-

bandwidth warrant because of the high social commitment.

Ciera's animations, however, throw away this warranting process. There is no

need for a doctor or midwife to watch over the birth. Her labor animations had the female

avatar "lay on the floor and squirm in labor," in contrast to the sterilized labor animations

that take place in medical or fantasy environments in other clinics.[258] She also fashioned

a squatting labor pose featured in one of her YouTube videos. In the thirty-second clip,

Ciera squats in a store in Second Life, her bare, pregnant belly trimmed with a pierced

belly button protruding from her neon pink club outfit as she squats on her ten-inch

heels.[259] The position is not fantastical or beyond what a first-life biological body could

do. One of the suggested videos YouTube recommended after I watched the *Ciera Spyker*

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[258] *Ciera Spyker*, "new pregnant related labor animations," *Second Life Forum Archives*,

April 25, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/198/56/255397/1.html.

[259] *Ciera Spyker*, "Me, *Ciera Spyker* in Labor," YouTube, 0:34,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFquaXWsYCo, June 8, 2008.

virtual birth was a first-life video on the benefits of birth in the squatting position.[260] Yet

the comments on *Ciera*'s video are overwhelmingly negative. Over eighty percent of the

comments express distaste over the video, and one poster expressly dismissed the work as

not indicative of Second Life at all: "omg this is not normally how you look in sl when

youre pregnant i got 2 girls and didnt look like this ...and she probbaly bought the tummy

and breasts (prims/sculpt) very weird.....never saw anything like it."[261] The poster is

telling the world that that there are norms in Second Life, and from his experience, *Ciera*

is outside of those norms.

Her fantastic designs similarly question the tie to the first-life body by taking

pregnancy to the opposite extreme. One of *Ciera*'s most outrageous designs was the quad

breast attachment. While she suggests they would be great for "Moo cows and Centaurs,"

fantasy avatars, she also markets them "for the more outgoing among us."[262] She had two

versions of the quad breast: one for animal avatars and another for humans. Quad breasts

go beyond the first-life biological body, yet they also display the kind of ability only

Second Life creators have access to.

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[260] Konstantin Varik, "Birth in Squatting Position," YouTube, 9:55,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFquaXWsYCo, February 25, 2013.

[261] Mientje04, comment on "Me, *Ciera Spyker* in Labor," YouTube, 0:34,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFquaXWsYCo.

[262] *Ciera Spyker*, "quad prim breasts for 'alternate type' avs and udder unit.," *Second Life Forum Archive*, August 11, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/195/bb/276137/1.html.

Ciera's events and what she asked the pregnant body to do proved more disturbing than her designs to many residents. Again, she fluctuated between the realistic and the fantastic. She created, for example, a surrogacy center on POP island and advertised for avatars willing to earn fifteen Linden dollars an hour to lie in a bed for two to three hours a day.

> I NEED 8 dedicated PREGNANT Avatars to participate and spend time in bed "gestating" for the joy of the new moms and pops to be who will visit you and pull your note cards for "updates" on your ever expanding condition. (you start at a small belly shape and progress to LARGE or a prim belly should you have one by two weeks end)
>
> MUST be able to lay in bed and advance thru all three trimesters over a course of 2 weeks (we give you growth shots in the med lab free of charge)- you will be required to Im your prospective parents whenever you are online so they may come "view" your progress and growth.[263]

Tegg Bode commented on this post with a single word: "Pregbots?"[264] The term could be taken derogatorily, but *Ciera* embraced the term and twisted it into

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[263] *Ciera Spyker*, "Starting a surrogate pregnancy center at POPs NEED 8 girls.," *Second Life Forum Archives*, July 10, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/118/eb/270126/1.html.

[264] Tegg Bode, "Starting a surrogate pregnancy center at POPs NEED 8 girls.," *Second Life Forum Archives*, July 11, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/118/eb/270126/1.html.

"pregonoughts." She pushes the avatar body to perform as it was not intended to operate in Second Life culture. Pregnant avatars could give birth in a maternity clinic, but the performance was limited to only one type of birth story/scenario: a mother giving birth within a relationship to a child representative of love. Surrogates are not unheard of in first life. They step in to help potential parents who are unable to give birth. In Second Life, birth is impossible for all avatars because the bodies are digital, not biological. Scripting gives the digital body its ability to perform birth, and since that fact is true across the digital landscape, in theory, all avatars are capable of giving birth given the right script. In fact, scripts could be produced to allow birth to happen in any way imaginable. A child could be birthed from an avatar's thigh just as Dionysus was born from Zeus. A surrogate is redundant in such a world, yet *Ciera* continued to advertise her surrogacy service. In a forum thread about the weirdest practices in Second Life, one in which pregnancy is spoken about in sarcastic ways, *Ciera* jumps in to talk about the surrogates she hires:

> Our pregnancies at the gestation station are only 2 weeks. This allows our surrogates the fun of 0-9 in record time with never a dull moment. (you get to grow every day intstead of every few weeks. I even have perfected a script that will auto grow over a course of a few weeks so you need not touch your edits, takes some control away from you and your end overall size. to be released in the next few weeks)[265]

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[265] *Ciera Spyker*, "My Afternoon as a Slave in Training," *Second Life Forum Archives*, August 25, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/00/278532/2.html.

The lightness of her tone ("0-9 in record time") reminds those reading the forum of the playfulness of virtual performance and the reference to her scripting to the manufactured nature of every birth performance. The reality of surrogacy in first life knows no place in Second Life, and the continued presence of *Ciera*'s surrogates points out how birth is controlling the female body by clearly explaining how she is scripting her surrogate bodies.

Ciera continued to point out the issues with birth in more fantastic ways as well. The POP sim hosted the first (and only) Swollen Orb contest in May of 2008. Pageants were started in the virtual world in 2004, and while many thought of them as popularity contests, they gained traction as events where avatars could model their styling of a body shape, skin, hair, and fashion combination.[266] The Swollen Orb competition was a very different display than other pageants. Rather than showing off idealized avatar bodies, the point of this pageant was to show off enormous pregnant bellies. The two categories in the contest were "Best belly and most unique 'different belly,'" categories that demonstrate an avatar's absurd parody of the first-life body.[267] These avatars weren't designed to be the perfect model of the avatar mother. The beauty contest put the female

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[266] For the earliest reference to pageants in Second Life, see Blake Rockwell, "Would people like to see Ms. Secondlife Pageants and City area Pageants?," *Second Life Forum Archives,* November 2, 2004, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/116/74/256575/1.html.

[267] *Ciera Spyker*, "pregnant avatar contest now taking apps.," *Second Life Forum Archives*, May 1, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/116/74/256575/1.html.

avatar body on display in a performance that was rapidly becoming private in this time period. Birth clinics were springing up, yet these pregnant avatars were delighted to show off their oversized pregnant bellies. *Azriel Rolendis*, *Ciera*'s former sim manager, remembers those days fondly: POP was for the avatars who didn't want to be average. "Pregnancy in sl is heavily commercialised now, and far more popular than anyone suspects among couples, as I'm sure you've discovered. POP was.. well, there has nevere been anything as berserkly weird and imaginative."[268] The imaginative avatar mother matches, however, with the idea of the bad mother. Lisa Ikemoto describes the first-life bad mother image:

> She has little education. . . . She is unsophisticated, easily influenced by simple religious dogma. She is pregnant because of promiscuity and irresponsibility. She is hostile to authority even though the state has good intentions. She is unreliable. She is ignorant and foreign. She does not know what is best. The cases ascribe these characteristics to the bad mother; this is the subtext, the things that can nearly be said.[269]

Rather than leaving the subtext unsaid, *Ciera*'s sim brought out the ideas that couldn't be said and put them on display. By being the bad mother image rather than the idealized version, she regularly showed the fragility of the performance of motherhood, undermining its usefulness in warranting the gender of the user behind the avatar. Her

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[268] Azriel Rolendis, interview, August 13, 2012.

[269] Lisa C. Ikemoto, "Furthering the inquiry: Race, class, and culture in the forced medical treatment of pregnant women," *Tennessee Law Review* 59 (1991-1992): 511.

own performance, one that straddles the fantastic and the believable, keeps people guessing whether a man or a woman is behind the antics at POP.

Ciera Spyker rarely commented on the detractors who plagued her Second Life existence, but in 2011, she took to her YouTube page to state, "hello, just popped in to say hi. I dont play preggers anymore really, Although I'm considering opening back up POP Industries (omg this is so old school SL lol) ps it was fun back then."[270] This posting reassures Second Life residents that her pregnancy performances are a thing of the past, but in the same breath, she holds the possibility of her return with the objects that challenge Second Life society and its norms. Her message seems to recognize that virtual society has shifted since her 2012 exit, that the "fun" wildness of the days when POP existed has turned into a world of more rigid codes. But her objects and transgressions still exist on the Linden Lab servers, and the haunting of her performances still lingers. Every time a Second Life doctor or midwife insists on a specific performance by using a set script, there is the lingering trace of the other animations that went before, ready to return with a single click of her mouse, bringing back the imperfect mother more than happy to point out the unreliability of birth as any sort of warrant.

In the end, she was telling the truth. She is *Ciera Spyker*, and she wins.

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[270]*Ciera Spyker*, "Me, *Ciera Spyker* in Labor," YouTube, 0:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFquaXWsYCo, video posted June 8, 2008, comment added 2011.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Shakespeare warned that "what dreams may come/ When we have shuffled off this mortal coil/ Must give us pause."[271] Second Life has been a place where such dreams are possible, a virtual world where users can leave behind the biological body and perform without the first-life boundaries surrounding that body. Virtual society, however, found the need to reconsider those freedoms, and that pause to reflect resulted in specific performances that bind residents to specific performances of gender.

Gender in Second Life doesn't operate under the same physical or societal conditions as first life. This open event space started with far more potentials than the first world, but since it couldn't rely on biology to keep gender legible, society needed to put new regulations in place for intimate relationships. While residents could offer a first impression that would contextualize their performances of identity, those same residents could turn around and break the implied commitment to that role by revealing deception behind the avatar body.

Early pioneering residents came to fear gender-switching avatars because of deception in intimate relationships. Society marked every member with the possibility of deception, then created numerous ways for those residents to lessen the effects of that

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[271] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Albert Weiner (Great Neck, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1962), 3.1.74-6. References are to act, scene, and line.

suspect marking: placing first-life photos in their profiles, using Second Life voice

features, and a host of other performances. In the early days of Second Life, there were

no mechanisms that could regulate the performances of users choosing to gender switch.

The open event space allowed for that potential, which made gender illegible despite the

appearance of the avatar body. To complicate the situation further, the event space also

contained the potential for genderless or differently gendered bodies. With intimate

relationships, sexual and platonic, proliferating in the new virtual world, the emerging

culture decided how to avoid relationships with the possibility of a mismatch between the

user's body and the avatar's digital representation.

Torley Wong and *Jade Lily* stepped into such a relationship early in Second Life's

history. *Torley* and *Jade*'s users met in first life despite discovering their gender-

switching behavior and continued to proclaim their love inworld. These two male, first-

life heterosexual users did not deny that a sexual first-life relationship may have

occurred. While Second Life values openness and tolerance, society viewed *Torley* and

Jade's relationship as one based on deception. If two male users adopted female avatars

in Second Life but clearly labeled their biological bodies from the very beginning of their

residency inworld, society would see no issue in those female avatars starting a

relationship. The veiled biological body combined with long-term gender play becomes

the true problem that needs to be solved.

Society initially asked for a gender verification system, showing how this virtual

world initially turned to overt rules to try to keep performance regulated to specific places

on the positional grid. Residents pushed Linden Lab to implement a way that the user's

biological body could be identified on each resident's profile and engaged in heated

debate about whether such a system would, in fact, solve the problem of gender deception inworld. These residents mistakenly believed that an overt rule could settle gender's instability inworld. Linden Lab did not implement a gender verification system because of the many ways such a system could be fooled, leaving society with no overarching regulation to prevent gender deception.

Instead of overt rules, Second Life society used habitus to govern gender. As potentials were explored, residents determined which performances would be appropriate and inappropriate, and then they instilled habitus to ensure that each type of performance would remain stabilized. New residents pick up these culturally understood regulations as they interact with older residents and observe behavior. Older residents demonstrate what looks like all the available potentials to residents just entering Second Life, essentially showing new residents only enough potentials to keep habitus in place. Instead of showing new residents an empty field, in other words, Second Life residents appear in soccer uniforms with the boundaries of the field already chalked onto the grass. New residents only see a soccer field and never see the potential of the field to host another game.

Older residents demonstrate gendered behaviors as part of habitus, and just as with the other expectations within habitus, they only display the appropriate performances. While habitus works to enforce a variety of behaviors, it works specifically within a gendered matrix to ensure that performances remain legible and avoid deception. Bodies are identified based on a positional grid as potentials are whittled down in the event space. The grid sets up binaries that keeps bodies identifiable, such as male/female, child/adult, or in Second Life's case, human avatar/animal or inanimate

object avatar. The most important Second Life grid position is when the society has verified the user's biological body and that body matches the resident's avatar body. The matched biological/digital body already shows a commitment to a long-term performance, the type of presentation that doesn't shift context. Society defines all other resident bodies in relationship to that position. Consider *Charlie Omega* and *Lynnix Muse*, the first couple to marry in Second Life. They occupied this primary grid position because they publicly married in the virtual world while, at the same time, partnering in first life.

Other residents choose to gender switch but reveal their biological user body. Society accepts these avatars and allows them to participate fully in the online culture. Second Life residents pride themselves on the openness and tolerance of the world. A variety of sexual preferences are not only tolerated but celebrated inworld, so if a user chooses a digital body that doesn't match his biological one but reveals the switch in some way to the Second Life community, the world not only accepts the behavior but assumes a open-minded stance when it comes to any intimate relationships that resident may have.[272] Take the example of *Sy Celina*. This female resident clearly states in her profile that she is a male in first life, substantiated by the picture of her first-life user.[273] She fully participates in inworld activities, including dancing and deep friendships with

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[272] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 138-9.

[273] Sy Celina, *Second Life* profile, accessed March 5, 2014.

other people. Because society doesn't see her performance as deceptive, it allows *Sy* to continue to build relationships without the need to perform further warranting activities.

Kyra Grosman in her study of gender-swapping in Second Life found that residents either gender swapped for less than twenty percent of their second lives or over ninety percent.[274] Society regulates gender-swapping activities via habitus, and birth and marriage ritual participants reperform the gendered norms within habitus to demonstrate their commitment to those norms. Residents believe they can figure out the twenty percent of avatars who only switch for a short time, and they put processes in place to keep such playful residents from interacting in intimate relationships. Certain groups will even give notice to others that they are actively searching for gender-switching. Lesbian sims, for example, often warn male users who may switch to a female avatar for sexual play that they will be thrown out of the sim. The Lesbian Love and Garden sim, for example, advertises its sim with a warning: "Looking for a quiet place to bring your lesbian lover? Or maybe a secluded place to meet your lesbian lover. This is it. explore the gardens and don't miss the fun hot spots hidden among flowers.--men may be ejected without any advance warning." Another lesbian sim, Lesbian Dreams, has a Green Lantern patrol made up of warranted male users/male residents who question any new visitor to the sim to attempt to identify male users masquerading as female avatars.

Residents assume that short-term gender-switching behavior can be identified and eliminated, but users who commit to a long-term performance of an alternate gender can

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[274] Kyra Grosman, "An Exploratory Study of Gender Swapping and Gender Identity in Second Life," PhD diss., The Wright Institute, 2010.

fly under the radar. *Torley* and *Jade* kept their biological bodies veiled until they started to discuss meeting in first life. These two users were not uncomfortable with the deception, but others feel such performances irreparably damage their relationships in Second Life. *Tanner Core*, for example, asked the community to find these residents because their actions hurt whomever they come in contact with: " I have truely felt violated and offended to find out someone I thought I knew was a a Man and there are Many men playing as women."[275] Grosman's study found that even users who gender-switch find it difficult to tolerate relationship deception, with many who admitted to long-term gender play stating they would never enter an intimate relationship without revealing their biological bodies.[276]

The fear of deception stems from the long-term performance of the veiled user/differently gendered resident position. To keep those residents occupying this grid position from being able to deceive others, Second Life society developed ritual performances that ask residents to commit to a single gendered performance. Marriage and birth rituals demand long-term commitments to gendered performances that place all of a resident's social, economic, and cultural capital on display, which amounts to betting his online life on the performance. *Chevy Bravin* entered into her first marriage ceremony in Second Life with the intention of adhering to society's guidelines. In her marriage with

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[275] Tanner Core, "Men Playing as Women/Women playing as Men," *Second Life Forum Archives*, December 17, 2008, http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/c1/298321/1.html.

[276] Grosman, "Exploratory Study of Gender Swapping," 85-8.

slutlia Aeon, *Chevy* never revealed her user body and maintained a sustained performance of femininity for several years. In that period, she demonstrated why the ritual works, since she remained confined to a feminine performance. When *Chevy* used her second marriage ritual as a moment to reveal her first-life user's biological body, a mismatch with the female avatar, she stepped out of the range of accepted behavior. Initially, *Chevy* seemed to escape any societal repercussions. *Chevy* told me in the first interview I conducted with her after the ceremony that she felt less encumbered now that she had shared her secret with her community in Second Life. Within a few months, however, *Chevy*'s user made the decision to change avatars and replace the female avatar with a male shape, possibly as a result of losing social and economic capital in her community.

Slag took a very different approach to confronting the norms of the marriage ceremony. Rather than allowing gender to confine the performance, *Slag* jumped back and forth between male and female by using the very ritual items approved by society. While *Slag* chose to have female animations for the ceremony, *Slag* also used the male animations during the reception. *Slag* played with as many gendered aspects as possible during the ceremony, from clothing choices to rejecting gendered pronouns during the ceremony. The ritual didn't warrant the body, and *Slag* did not commit to a long-term gendered performance. Society failed to hold *Slag* to a single-gender performance despite the regulations put in place.

Chevy wanted to use the ritual to wrest free of the gendered performance she had committed to during her initial years inworld. The problem with her plan rests in the fact that the ritual is designed to bury the user body and warrant the gender of the avatar body. By revealing her user, *Chevy* was not honoring the ritual but actively performing the

exact deception the ritual intends to suppress. *Slag* took a different approach to undermining the ritual by performing ignorance of basic Second Life skills. When *Slag* appeared to be unable to use a poseball, *Slag* jumped back and forth between gendered (by using the poseball) and ungendered (by getting off of the poseball and resuming a gender ambiguous status) performance. The performance choices demonstrated how the ritual elements are intended to codify gender, but *Slag* and *Plath*'s wedding returned to the earlier Second Life potential of avatar gender not needing to be verified in intimate relationships.

Second Life birth ritual has many similarities to the marriage ritual, but the restrictions and oversight for the performance are more stringent. While Second Life residents pride themselves on their open-mindedness and tolerance, the birth ritual reveals an underlying conservatism when it comes to biological performance. Society excludes all avatar bodies except female digital bodies from the birth ritual, yet the potential for genderless or male avatars to give birth remains a potential in this virtual world. None of the performers I witnessed stepped out of the ritual elements of the performance. Birth performance has been strictly codified due to the oversight of doctors and nurses inworld. Performers still believe they have a significant amount of choice within the ritual because Second Life doctors work as arbiters of taste, just as wedding planners do for the marriage ceremony. A female avatar who wishes to give birth meets with the doctor of her choice, and as they interact, the doctor suggests the specific items for the performance. The female avatar can choose to forego the doctor's advice, but as my Second Life medical professor noted, a doctor can and *should* refuse to join any birth performance outside of the ritual parameters. Any birth performer wanting to perform

outside of society's suggested ritual has to create and perform her birth away from the approved birth clinics. These stringent controls directly result from the conservative attitude surrounding this biological performance.

That prospect didn't scare *Ciera Spyker*. Rather than using society-approved birth products that romanticize the female biological/digital performance, she carved out a different kind of virtual pregnancy that revealed the hidden potentials of the avatar body. Second Life society dictated that the female avatar mesh would be the most "natural" shape for pregnancy, so *Ciera* used a female avatar with an absurdly sized pregnancy attachment to show how the female avatar body was just as unnatural as the male avatar mesh. While society demanded realism in the birth ritual to connect the biological body of the user with the performer, *Ciera* went further with realism than society was comfortable with, fashioning a morning sickness toilet. Every boundary society set up was a cue for *Ciera* to push the boundary beyond what they intended.

Slag and *Ciera* challenge the authenticity of an important societal value: the high place of creativity in the virtual world. Linden Lab trumpets Second Life as a place where creativity reigns supreme and residents are free to assume any virtual life they wish. Such a view ignores the importance of society's restrictions on avatar behavior. Habitus confines performers and gives the illusion that performers have a choice in how they act. Residents adhering to the ritual believe their performances are unique, while habitus and the regulations of the world ensure uniformity and stability.

Creativity, in other words, isn't really an individual's choice but the process of picking already assigned positions on the grid. *Torley Wong*, now *Torley Linden*, remains among those virtual world enthusiasts who believe that gender is still an individual

choice, but even in his enthusiasm for an open world, he implicitly displays habitus at work:

> This is a new age!
>
> A new age where people are born with a biological gender and elect optional genders online. Just as how we can choose a new name and identity within Second Life for ourselves, gender is part of this overall package. It gets regarded as freakish by some, even some SLers, but the real forward-thinkers and -doers know how antiquated this mentality will be in years to come.
>
> Hating someone for a choice of love and friendship is as ridiculous as banning colors from the rainbow. Nature adores diversity. My wife prefers me to be in a male avatar, but there are times when we are sexay doggirls…[277]

Torley happily proclaims that the virtual world is a place where "forward-thinkers" can overcome first-life gender and have the choice to perform gender however they wish through their computers. Even in this proclamation, *Torley* himself shows how he has been affected by virtual gender norms. After *Torley* and *Jade*'s relationship ended, *Torley* met and married a female user/female avatar in both Second and first life. His wife urges him to use a male avatar (the powerful matching user/resident body position), and while *Torley* still uses differently gendered avatars on occasion, the couple's wedding solidified

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[277] Torley Linden, "GENDERBENDER OMG!," *Alphonsus's Random Drivel* (blog), November 12, 2008, http://alphonsus.wordpress.com/2008/11/12/genderbender-omg/.

Torley's gender in society's view. He is allowed to play but only in the confines of a committed, gendered relationship. His use of the matching user/resident grid position supercedes any other grid position he may playfully and temporarily occupy. Similarly, *Jade Lily* also married a female user/female avatar in both worlds, and her profile in Second Life now links to a Facebook photo page with their first-life wedding photos. *Jade*'s user still operates a female avatar, so he and his wife perform a lesbian relationship inworld. Both of them link to their wedding photos in their profiles, effectively nullifying the gender play by revealing their biological bodies.

Older research on virtual worlds would point to stories such as *Torley* and *Jade*'s as indicative of identity play. Sherry Turkle tells the story of a virtual world user, *Garrett*, who entered his text-based virtual world as a woman. Turkle traces *Garrett*'s first-life reasons behind his gender-switching performance, which she believes is an example of the freedom of virtual worlds.[278] The idea that virtual world users can play with gender rests on the assumption that the places like Second Life still have unlimited potentials. If you looked at Second Life on its first day of operation, Turkle could look at the world and declare it an open space for gender play. Far more potentials existed in Second Life at that point than later on in the world. Lori Kendall, on the other hand, writes that virtual worlds have become closed off places where society only allows binary performances.[279]

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[278] Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen,* 217-19.

[279] Lori Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2002), 221-5.

At this point in Second Life history, Kendall's conclusion seems closer to valid if a resident wishes to engage in social interactions.

Research cannot boil down virtual worlds so easily. Second Life grid positions can include gendered positions outside of the binary, but residents choosing such positions are always defined in relation to other residents choosing gendered performances. Take the example of *quadrapop tree*, an avatar who openly states he switches "shape" often, using male, female, animal and inanimate objects.[280] His partner, *Flinderesia*, actively plays a female avatar and does not switch avatar bodies or gendered performance. When they went through the ritual of marriage, *quadrapop* played a male avatar to her female avatar, and at no time during the ritual did he switch bodies or change his gendered performance. Her committed performance warrants his male performance in the ritual, settling his primary grid position in the minds of the guests evaluating and authenticating the ceremony. While this couple hasn't warranted their biological bodies inworld through pictures or voice performance, society considers *quadrapop*'s performances male because his marriage ritual satisfied the warranting procedure for that grid position.

A truly genderless performance must avoid the marriage and birth rituals. *Rizzo Rumble*, a hippo and active member of the Anglican Church of Second Life, uses no gendered pronouns in her interactions with other members, nor can his animal body

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[280] quadrapop tree, Second Life profile, May 26, 2013.

perform the gendered animations in the world.[281] *Rizzo* belongs to book clubs, Bible

studies, and interacts with the other church members each week, but in the four years I've

known *Rizzo*, he has never even hinted at having anything more than friendships with

other avatars. If *Rizzo* wanted to get married or give birth, she would be compelled by

virtual habitus to conform to the visible practices of birth and marriage currently in place,

meaning a decision to occupy a gendered body.

When an avatar makes a decision to live as an animal, inanimate object, or other

avatar shape that eschews gender, the user commits to maintaining a virtual identity free

of intimate relationships. Erving Goffman in his discussion of performance of the self

states that the characters—or in the case of the virtual, avatars—people mold to present to

the world must control the "coherence among setting, appearance, and manner."[282] If they

are diligent and successful in that performance, the avatar takes the necessary steps to

ensure "that the audience takes his or her performance seriously."[283] Second Life society

dictates that a genderless identity cannot give birth or go through a marriage ritual

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[281] *Rizzo* accepts both female and male pronouns in casual conversation, unlike *Slag*. For

this reason, I switch between the two pronouns when describing this resident.

[282] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY:

Doubleday, 1959), 25.

[283] Courtney Dillard, Larry D. Browning, Sim B. Sitkin, Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, Sandra

Metts, and William R. Cupach, "Impression Management and the Use of Procedures at

the Ritz-Carlton: Moral Standards and Dramaturgical Discipline," *Communication

Studies* 51, no. 4 (2000): 410.

without choosing a female avatar (in the case of birth) or at the very least revealing some clues about her biological body, the highest warrant possible (in the case of marriage). Such a performance would disrupt the gendered matrix of the world, but a performer is welcome to participate in the world in a less intimate way if he chooses that position on the matrix. Gender may look like it is performed differently to those people looking at it with a first-life perspective, especially with genderless avatars roaming the landscape. From a virtual standpoint, however, regulations keep these performances legible by defining them in relationship to gendered residents.

The curious thing about these virtual gender regulations is the flimsiness of their construction. The world is constructed of pixels, and the same computer language used to program gendered performance can be used to dismantle gender. A resident can point out the error of the grid anytime. One of the characteristics of ritual is its ability to create social change,[284] and within Second Life birth and marriage, the potential still remains to upend gender. Society may think it buried the potential for gender play, but the possibility still exists just under the surface of the carefully constructed world.

That's the beauty of residents such as *Ciera Spyker*. She keeps pointing out how the societal grid is formed and, at the same time, illustrates why gender is unstable. Using the same tools that constructed the gendered positions, *Ciera* shows how virtual performance remains distanced from biological, first-life birth events. *Slag* and *Plath* performed the marriage ritual with the same playfulness using the very elements intended

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[284] Robbie Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003), 4-5.

to gender the avatar body. By switching back and forth between male and female symbols, *Slag* performed the potential for gender play.

Ritual contains the paradoxical possibility for change even as it reinforces societal norms. While Second Life society has tried to contain gender with mechanisms like birth and marriage performances, residents can still find ways of exploring potentials society hoped they would forget. Virtual worlds still hold the possibility of being open spaces for gender play, but performers must continue to make specific efforts to upset the established rituals in order for those forgotten potentials to take center stage again.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

Alt – Literally an alternate avatar. Second Life allows users to have up to fifteen avatars for free, and many users have different avatars for different activities that they wish to pursue. Often, these avatars may be differently gendered, but their virtual lives do not intersect with one another.

Animation – Lines of script which tell the points on the avatar mesh body to move. The best animators user motion capture for their animations, but basic programs can also be used to move the avatar. A walking animation would send a signal to the knee and hip areas of the mesh body to move.

Animation Overrider (AO) – In Second Life, a standard set of movement animations is attached to every avatar. Residents have described these basic animations "duck walking" because of the unnatural pace and style of both walking and standing. AOs animate an avatar at all times, giving them distinct walks, sits, and flying animations

Digerati – The word used to describe the superstar builders, designers, and residents in Second Life.

First Life – This dissertation uses the term first life in opposition to the terms "real life" or "actual life." Many of the activities, such as commerce and relationships, produce real results in terms of economics or emotions, making real life a problematic term that seems to denigrate the reality of events in the virtual space.

Tom Boellstorff argues for actual life, using the etymology of the word to propose that it is the user doing the actions of the avatar, making the user the actual actor. See Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life,* 18-20. In my work, however, I suggest that there is a more complicated relationship between the avatar and the user resulting in occasions when the avatar is the actor as a resident of the world and the user is the spectator of the action. For that reason, I use Au's term. His work details the origins of Second Life, and in the early discussions of what to name the company, Philip Rosedale, the head of Linden Labs, wanted the name to hint at a second chance at life while not dismissing the accomplishments of a user's first try at sculpting an identity. First life, in this sense, comes to indicate a primacy of which identity existed chronologically rather than putting any undo importance on the activities of that life. This term is also used throughout Second Life literature based on Linden Labs continued use of the phrase to describe the user's experience rather than the avatar's. See Wagner James Au, *The Making of Second Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 66-67.

Gestures - A special command that can be programmed by any resident to spit out a line of text when a single button is pushed. These gestures are often programmed for oft repeated phrases.

Lag – When the time between sending information to the Second Life servers and the time to retrieve information back equals more than two seconds, lag occurs. In practical terms, that means that lag causes chat to appear several seconds after it was sent or makes avatars walk forward more slowly than normal.

Lindens – The name commonly used for the employees of Linden Lab as they appear

 inworld. Linden is the last name for these residents. Lindens can also be the term

 for the inworld currency, but for the purposes of clarity, this study will use Linden

 dollars to designate the currency of Second Life.

Mesh – A series of points over which a texture can be applied. The avatar body is mesh,

 so a skin texture is stretched over the points to create the look of a human body.

 The points of the mesh itself are arranged to mimic human anatomy.

Poof – A verb which indicates when a person crashes or logs off of Second Life. The

 word derives from the puff of smoke that appears in place of the avatar for a few

 seconds after they've been disconnected.

Primitive or Prim – A basic building block in the world. Several basic geometric shapes

 are provided with the program, and each one, such as a square or a sphere, are one

 prim. Putting them together creates objects made up of prims. Because of the

 limited number of prims that are allowed on a piece of land,

Rezz – A word used to describe how objects in the virtual world gradually become sharp

 as each user's computer downloads the information from the Second Life servers.

 People on slower computers or connections rezz more slowly, which means that

 certain objects might not be visible to them immediately.

Sculpted Object or Sculptie – Second Life as a program allows for several shapes of

 objects to be created, such as spheres, cubes, rings, etc. However, these basic

 shapes limit the creativity of building. Second Life introduced sculpties in 2005 to

 alleviate the problem. A sculpted object is a 3D, mesh object that can be created

 in any shape a user desires and imported into the virtual world. They also take the

place of only one prim, so they became highly prized for their ability to replicate several of the standard building prims with a single prim. For example, a ladder, which would normally take 7 or 8 prims, could be made as a single prim using a sculptie. Other objects, such as curved staircases, skirts, and hair could be made with sculpties.

Shape – Every avatar has a shape that must be worn to transform the basic body mesh into a pleasing shape for the user. An avatar can make their own shape using the program: they can manipulate almost every area of the body, including everything from torso length to more minute details like the shape of the nostrils.

Sim – An area of land in Second Life roughly equivalent to a mile square. Land owners hold rights to control how land can be used and by whom.

Skin – The texture applied to the mesh body shape to give the appearance of a body.

Teleport – The common method of traveling between sims in the virtual world. In a practical sense, an avatar's pixels are erased from one area of the world and reassembled in another, very much like *Star Trek* episodes made famous. Technically, the program transfers your avatar's information through their servers to the area of the program that was requested. Because there's always new information in the destination sim, there is lag while the world reloads. Everything appears grey to new arrivals until the textures and shapes rezz.

Texture – A high quality image, 1024x1024, that is used to make plain objects take on the characteristics of their first life counterpart. All prims are textured with a picture of plywood when they are created. If you had untextured prims in the shape of a

vase, it would look like plywood until it was textured to look like glass or porcelain.

Voice – Second Life added the ability for users to speak through their avatars in 2007. Before this point, text chat was the only option available for the communication.

APPENDIX B

FORUM RESEARCH LIST

The Second Life forums have undergone several transformations since Second

Life opened in 2002. Linden Lab hosts the current forum on the Second Life website, but

the old forums remain in archived form on the Second Life Forum Archives website

(http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/-1/1.html). The archive is arranged in loosely

categorized sub-forums according to how the forums changed over the years. Rather than

being easily browsable, Linden Lab has done little to organize the posts, making it

difficult to find posts by simply scrolling through the archive. The archive uses Google as

a search engine, and while the search function is helpful, Google will only display the

first 500 results for any one search. A search for "baby," for example, produces 14,800

results. When looking through the results, however, Google will only display 486, stating

that the other results are irrelevant. In order to find as many relevant entries to this study,

I had to search a variety of words with varying date parameters to find as many entries as

possible. The following is a representative list of the words I used to search through the

Second Life forums.

1. abort

2. abortion

3. age verification

4. ageplay

5. Andie Apollo

6. Katerina Eyre

7. attendants

8. automatic wedding

9. babies

10. baby

11. baby clothes

12. belly talker

13. birth

14. birth animations

15. birth center

16. birth centre

17. birth package

18. birth tub

19. birthing chair

20. Bonifacio

21. boyfriend

22. bridal

23. bride

24. bride hud

25. bridesmaids

26. Bronwen Llewelyn

27. celebrant

28. celtic knot

29. ceremony

30. Charlie Omega

31. child

32. child avatar

33. Ciera Spyker

34. collar

35. couple

36. crib

37. cuddle pose

38. Da Boom

39. dad

40. daddy

41. dance animations

42. danceball

43. dancing

44. deception

45. doctor

46. doctor scrubs

47. dream wedding

48. emoting

49. escort

50. etiquette

51. fairytale wedding

52. father

53. firework

54. fireworks

55. first birth

56. first life

57. first prim baby

58. first wedding

59. frankenbarbie

60. furry baby

61. garden wedding

62. gender

63. gender deception

64. gender swapping

65. gender verification

66. gesture

67. gestures

68. girlfriend

69. GooGoo baby

70. gorean birth

71. groom

72. groom hud

73. groomsmen

74. Hamlet Linden

75. Jaffee Gaffer

76. Jessie

77. Jessie problems

78. Jim Levy

79. labor

80. lamaze

81. lil brother

82. lil sister

83. linden

84. lindens

85. Lolas

86. love

87. lover

88. lovers

89. luxury

90. Lynnix Muse

91. maid of honor

92. maid of honour

93. mama allpa

94. marriage

95. maternal

96. maternity

97. maternity center

98. maternity centre

99. maternity clothes

100. medical school

101. medicine

102. minister

103. mom

104. momma clothes

105. mommy

106. mother

107. mum

108. mummy

109. Natoma

110. natural

111. natural choice

112. neko baby

113. nightmaire

114. nurse

115. nursery textures

116. ob/gyn

117. officiant

118. officiate

119. partner

120. partnership

121.paternal

122.paternity

123.penis

124.perform

125.performance

126.Phat Azz

127.physician

128.pooter

129.pooterbilt

130.preggers

131.preggo goddess

132.pregnancy

133.pregnancy shapes

134.pregnancy test

135.pregnant

136.pregnant pose

137.preonaught

138.priest

139.prim baby

140.proposal

141.propose

142.real life

143.residents

144. rocket

145. rockets

146. school

147. Shipley

148. slave collar

149. speech hud

150. stork delivery

151. surrogate

152. talking tummy

153. tantra

154. theme wedding

155. transgender

156. ultrasound

157. university

158. vagina

159. Valaryia DeVinna

160. Valentine's day

161. vampire baby

162. veil

163. virtual pregnancy

164. voice

165. vow

166. vows

167. wedding

168. wedding animations

169. wedding cake

170. wedding dress

171. wedding hair

172. wedding invitations

173. wedding invite

174. wedding magazine

175. wedding package

176. wedding photo

177. wedding planner

178. wedding proposal

179. wedding protocol

180. wedding ring

181. wedding set

182. wedding store

183. wedding textures

184. wedding venue

185. wedding walk platform

186. Xcite

187. Zooby accessories

188. Zooby babies

189. Zooby baby

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW AND FIELD NOTE DOCUMENTS

The IRB board approved the following documents for my field research in the virtual world. I have included my consent document as well as all of the approved forms for both of my IRB approved studies. The first study focused on observation of births and interviews with birth participants. The second study allowed me to enroll anonymously in a Second Life medical school. These documents are included as reference for others considering Second Life or virtual world research.

IRB Instant Message Recruitment Guidelines

Second Life avatars use instant messaging within the program to communicate to specific individuals. I will use this capability to recruit potential interviewees. Since this type of communication is spontaneous, it will vary from participant to participant. The researcher, however, will endeavor to communicate several key pieces of information during the recruitment process:

1. The researcher will identify her real life name, institutional affiliation, contact information, and research interests early in the conversation.

2. The researcher will stress the confidentiality of the study, both for the virtual and real life identity of the participant.

3. The researcher will stress the virtual aspect of the study and the fact that no real life information will be asked for during the interview.

4. The researcher will explain the amount of time the interview will take.

5. The researcher will explain that there are no benefits to the avatar, but she will further elaborate how participating in the study will provide insight into how gender works in the virtual space.

6. The researcher will mention the requirements to verify the avatar's eligibility in the research. By participating in the rituals at the locations in Second Life, the avatars have already demonstrated their eligibility (only users who have been age-verified can access these areas), but it will be mentioned to double check that the avatar can participate.

Sample conversation:

Airtsela Charisma: Hello, I was present at your wedding a week ago. I wonder if I could talk to you about that event for a second?

Jane Avatar: Sure! I would love to talk about it.

Airtsela Charisma: Great! I'm doing my dissertation and research on performance of rituals like marriage in Second Life. I'm interested in the way men and women perform their roles during that ceremony. My RL name is Alicia Corts, and I'm at the University of Georgia. The primary investigator is Marla Carlson, who is also at UGA. Our email addresses are abcorts@uga.edu and marlac@uga.edu. You're welcome to look at my profile to see more about my research and what it means. I'd love to interview you about your wedding.

Jane Avatar: That sounds interesting.

Airtsela Charisma: Well, if you're interested, can I tell you about what you would have to do?

Jane Avatar: Sure

Airtsela Charisma: First off, the study is totally confidential. No information about your avatar or any real life details you disclose will be identifiable in my final study. I want to make sure your virtual and real lives are protected.

Jane Avatar: Okay

Airtsela Charisma: Second, you won't receive anything for your participation. You will get to talk about your wedding and all of the choices you made, like how you picked your wedding dress. That information will help me understand how male and female avatars perform in the virtual world. It will take between 45 minutes and an hour, depending on how in depth you want to go with your answers.

Jane Avatar: I love talking about my wedding! That sounds like fun!

Airtsela Charisma: Great! You should know, too, that I'm only interested in your virtual life. You don't have to disclose any information about your real life unless you feel it's important to the questions. You have to be 18 years of age or older, and you need to have participated in one or all of the rituals I mentioned.

Jane Avatar: Good to know. I'm definitely eligible.

Airtsela Charisma: What time would be good for you to do an interview?

As demonstrated in this sample exchange, instant messaging gives me the ability to speak to an avatar directly about the project. The culture of Second Life revolves around social communication with others, and this method of recruitment will allow me to get the information about the study across to potential subjects in a way that will give me the best opportunity for successful recruitment in this virtual world.

Second Life Researcher Profile – Airtsela Charisma

Second Life profiles are very short and do not allow for long explanations of research. I have created a website with all of my IRB forms, research explanations, and samples of my work which will be a part of the profile and accessible to all Second Life users. The website is active and can be seen and approved now. It is against Second Life terms of service to post email addresses or phone numbers in an avatar's profile, so Second Life researchers post links to websites with that information.

PROFILE:

My name is Alicia Corts, and I am a PhD student at the University of Georgia in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies researching ritual performance in virtual worlds and how gender plays a role in those performances. I am observing birth, marriage, and avatar death. I do use video recording of some performances in public spaces on occasion. Please see http://abcorts.myweb.uga.edu for more information about my work, my contact information, and how you can participate in it.

IRB Interview Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study on the performance of birth, marriage, and death rituals in Second Life. The researcher is interested in finding out how gender roles operate within the virtual world.

You will be asked to share your experience in participating in one or more of these rituals. You may be asked for snapshots or machinima of the rituals in question. These photos will not be used in the publication of the study but will be useful in analyzing and categorizing performance. THE RESEARCHER WILL KEEP THE PHOTOS OR MACHINIMA LONG ENOUGH TO ANALYZE ALL OF THE ELEMENTS, THEN THEY WILL BE DELETED FROM THE RESEARCHER'S SECOND LIFE INVENTORY AND COMPUTER HARD DRIVE. THE RESEARCHER WILL KEEP THE PHOTOS AND MACHINIMA NO LONGER THAN ONE YEAR FROM THE DATE OF THE INTERVIEW. AS NOTED IN THE SECOND LIFE TERMS OF SERVICE, LINDEN LABS CAN ACCESS AND HOLD DATA FROM CHAT TRANSCRIPTS INDEFINITELY. ACCESS TO THESE RECORDS IS LIMITED TO THOSE WITHIN THE COMPANY, IS PRIMARILY USED FOR DIAGNOSTIC PURPOSES AND IS NOT USED FOR ANY PURPOSE BY OUTSIDE COMPANIES OR INDIVIDUALS WITHOUT THE PERMISSION OF THE AVATAR. The researcher will "do no harm" in the consideration of the personal, social, and political implication of use.

The only foreseeable discomfort associated with the study is the invasion of your privacy; YOU MAY FEEL THAT SOME OF THE QUESTIONS BRING UP NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH BIRTH, MARRIAGE, OR

DEATH. IF YOU FEEL ANY DISCOMFORT, YOU ARE FREE TO SKIP THE

QUESTION OR END THE INTERVIEW AT ANY TIME. There are no direct benefits

from participation in the study. This study, however, may help explain what ritual

performance in virtual worlds helps us to understand about ourselves and the worlds, real

and virtual, around us. These performances could be a way of demonstrating the worth of

these virtual worlds as places for identity formation and community-building.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or discontinue your

involvement at any time without penalty. There are no direct benefits to you. Your

Second Life avatar name will be changed in the research to protect your virtual identity.

If you share any real life information, your identity and information will be uses

anonymously in the work as well. No information about your virtual or real lives will be

connected to your avatar or real world names at any time. THERE IS A LIMIT TO THE

CONFIDENTIALITY THAT CAN BE GUARANTEED DUE TO THE

TECHNOLOGY ITSELF. You do agree that I may retell your personal recollections

about your experience in these rituals. Such information, however, will not be traceable

to either your Second Life or real life identity. ALL IDENTIFIERS WILL BE

ELIMINATED FROM THE DATA WITHIN ONE DAY AFTER IT IS GATHERED.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with your participation in this interview.

If you agree to participate, you will sit down with the researcher for an interview via

private instant messaging. The interview will take between 45 minutes and an hour and a

half. THE INTERVIEW MAY BE VIDEO RECORDED, BUT ONLY IF YOU

CONSENT TO THE RECORDING.

The researchers, ALICIA CORTS AND DR. MARLA CARLSON (PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR), will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address *IRB@uga.edu*

PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.

1. Instrument – Interview Guide - Birth

Birth Interview Guide

1. How long was your avatar active (logging in and interacting with other residents at least once per week) before you decided to give birth?

    a. When did your avatar join Second Life?

    b. Which communities or groups do you participate in?

    c.   Do you create content (clothes, buildings, animations, etc) in SL?

2. Are you partnered or married in Second Life?

    a. If so, how was your partner supportive or unsupportive of your choice to give birth?

    b. If not, were any other avatars involved in helping you with your decision? What was their involvement?

3. When did you first realize that avatars could give birth in Second Life?

    a. Were you intrigued by the possibility? Why or why not?

    b. Did you have friends in Second Life that gave birth? What involvement did you have?

    c. What about the birth process most appealed to you?

4. What inventory items were important to you during your pregnancy?

    a. Did you investigate the "natural" possibilities for getting pregnant in SL? Why or why not?

    b. What fashion did you wear when you were pregnant?

    c. How many photos did you take during your pregnancy? What/who was in the photos?

    d. What was the most important thing you considered when choosing the items used during your pregnancy?

5. How did you choose your maternity clinic?

    a. How did you decide on the length of your pregnancy?

    b. If you used voice during the birth, what made you decide to use that Second Life feature?

    c. How would you describe the day your avatar went into labor?

6. How many photos did you take of the birth and the baby afterwards?

    a. Which ones are your favorites? Why?

    b. Do you keep any of these photos in your Second Life home?

    c. Did you share the photos with other? If so, which ones?

7. How did giving birth change your avatar's place in Second Life?

    a. How did it make you feel more like a mother?

    b. How did it bring you closer to your friends/family in Second Life?

    c. How did other relationships change?

    d. Did you lose any friends because of your choice to give birth?

8. What advice would you give another avatar who is thinking about giving birth in Second Life?

2. Instrument – Interview Guide - Marriage

Marriage Interview Guide

1. When did you meet your Second Life partner/spouse?

    a. What activities were you both involved in?

    b. What was it about your partner that first interested you?

2. How did your spouse/you propose?

    a. How long had you known each other?

    b. Was it a spontaneous decision? What prompted the proposal?

    c. How did you choose the engagement ring/ring set?

3. Have you ever used the voice feature of Second Life with your partner?

    a. If so, when did you first use the feature?

    b. If not, are you interested in using the feature in the future? Why or why not?

4. What was the most important inventory item in your wedding?

    a. How did you choose your wedding dress/tux/outfit?

    b. What party favor did you give guests, if any?

    c. Did you shop with your partner for the items? What process did you use to choose things like the flowers, the cake, the venue, etc.?

5. Why did you choose your wedding location?

    a. How many locations did you consider before deciding on the venue?

    b. What about the location made it special to you and your partner?

6. How many photos did you take of the ceremony?

    a. Which ones are your favorites? Why?

    b.   Do you keep any of these photos in your Second Life home?

    c.   Did you share the photos with other? If so, which ones?

7. Who did you invite to the ceremony?

    a.   Who officiated the ceremony?

    b.   Why did you invite these people to share your ceremony?

8. How did your relationship with your Second Life partner change after the ceremony?

    a.   Have other relationships changed after your partnership/marriage? How so?

9. How did giving birth change your avatar's place in Second Life?

    a.   Do you feel like you more fully embody the role of partner/spouse? Why or why not?

    b.   How did it bring you closer to your friends/family in Second Life?

    c.   How did other relationships change?

    d.   Did you lose any friends because of your choice to get married/partner?

10. What, if anything, happened during the ceremony that was unusual or beyond what you were expecting?

11. In considering all of the events leading up to and surrounding your Second Life partnership/marriage, what's the primary emotion you attach to them?

    a.   Would you advise others to go through a similar ceremony? Why or why not?

3. Instrument – Participant Observation

Participant Observation Tracking Form

Second Life location:

Time Start:

Time Finish:

Quantitative data:

Total number of avatars present during the ceremony:

Total number participating in the ceremony:

Qualitative data:

Gestures or animations used during the ceremony:

Movement in the space observed during the ceremony:

Objects used during the ceremony:

Timeline of ceremony:

General observations:

Immediate log of researcher reactions (to be recorded directly after participant

observation research) :

Narratives observed:

Coding of the open chat log associated with the ceremony: