InTensions

Disintegrating Involvement in *Second Life*

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Abstract

The following paper is a theoretical perspective on identity and embodiment disintegration in designed virtual sex involvements. The study data, derived from avatar sex participant interviews and virtual world field observations demonstrates the variance of enacted cognitive processes in the progressions of anticipatory desire and realized interactions. It is suggested that we design our selves and our worlds in anticipation of involvements and, reciprocally, in the acts of involving with these designed worlds and selves we, in turn, are progressively defined and modified. To designate worlds of potential involvement is to engage in a relentless struggle with incongruity. The empirical disintegration of self and world is an ongoing fact, emergent with ongoing re-designation and re-integration of self and world. This essay highlights the role of emphatic congruence assessments in the disintegrating involvements of avatar sex and intimacy.

Introduction

Based on an grounded theory analysis[i] of participant processes in avatar sex and intimacy in the virtual world *Second Life*, this essay focuses on enacted and embodied cognitive processes[ii] and sexual scripting (Gagnon and Simon 2005; Simon and Gagnon 1986) underlying avatar design and involvement in virtual worlds. The study data, derived from avatar sex

participant interviews and virtual world field observations, demonstrates variation in cognitive processes as participants in *Second Life* (SL) anticipate their desires and realize interactions in the virtual world communication environment. The data and its subsequent conceptualization are consistent with observations and descriptions provided by other recent studies on sexual interaction in *Second Life* (Jensen 2007; Jensen 2009; Waskul and Martin 2010; Brookey and Cannon 2009; Boellstorff 2008).

[2]   The findings of this study suggest that we design our selves and our worlds in anticipation of involvements and, reciprocally, in the acts of involving with these designed worlds and selves we, in turn, are modified and defined anew. The processes of involvement design in avatar sexual relationships are highly relevant to sexual scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon 1976 and 1986) as these illustrate the enactment of the socio-cognitive processes of scripting in sexual interactions mediated by virtual world communication technologies. The emphasis on "design" that emerges in this study presents a variation on sexual scripting in which the narrow bandwidth of interaction afforded by virtual world technology is intensively managed by participants to bear the fullest expression of desire as it is socially and individually constructed. The findings of this study bring to the theory of sexual scripting an emphasis on cognitive processes that I suggest

adds another layer of analysis to sexual scripting theory's orientation to the socio-cultural infusion of individuals' sex lives.

[3] How can we conceptualize the cognitive processes at work in participants' design of their avatar identities and the worlds of their involvement, positioned as they are between the past, the anticipated, and the emergent experiences within SL? Two phases of the avatar involvement design process emerged and are emphasized in the present analysis. The first phase is one of reflective assessment or *affective* designation, in which participants reflect on their present definitions and characterizations of self and world, as well as their parameters and potentials for social interaction. These self-understandings typically include assessments of sexual preference, social disposition, personal history, current motivations, moral or ethical declarations, personal philosophy, and world defining attributes, especially regarding what is reality and what is virtuality. Affective designation amounts to a type of stocktaking or inventory of current self-understandings and worldviews. Avatar participants typically make use of these affective designations as a pre-condition, which is subsequently modified to create variance in self-characterization and interaction potential. This active phase of modification is conceptualized as effective designation to indicate the participant's intention and commitment to engage with others through the affordances of a modified self-presentation and world definition.

These phases are concurrent and integrated. Every act of affective designation has both a disintegrative and integrative effect, in that through each act of reflection the participant conducts a reformulation of the history of her acts and a reformulation of her readiness to act. These self-stories and worldviews are subject to change, however small, with each retelling. As Jensen (2009) observes of avatar actors:

> On the one hand, in the process of making sense of their virtual world, the actors are transformed and become avatars, while on the other, the avatars also transform the actors. There is a continuous interplay of transformation of meaning going on (42).

[4]   Participants may differentially restate themselves and their worldview for new audiences, with new motivations, and with the layering of new experiences. Every modification or effective designation has the consequence of unleashing variance and incongruity in the participant's involvement with others.

[5] Involvement designs are conceptual dispositions for sexual involvement drawn from arrangements of personal ideals and desires, sexual experiences, and socio-cultural sexual possibilities. The complex composition of personal and social factors in avatar involvement designs means that avatars are cast into processes of constant reflection and evaluation. Both

the processes of avatar designation and avatar involvement are shown to vary based on participant assessments of what I call here the "emphatic" congruence, or agreement of avatar identities, worldviews, and actions. Emphatic congruence refers to symmetry between individual and important dimensions of sexual or intimate involvement, such as gender presentation, sexual orientation, and stylistic preferences. These dimensions are selectively and differentially emphasized by participants, as is the value of congruence or incongruence they present to participants. Involvements among avatars are facilitated and supported by an emphatic congruence of significant parameters of sexual expression.

[6]   Yet, in the flux of emergent virtual lives, involvements are subject to variance, as are all arrangements of material and living things. As relationships are tested, identities introspected, as desires are exercised or frustrated, strategies for sexual and intimate involvement are subject to revision. Designations are modified *in situ* as new perceptions are accrued and historical perceptions are re-imagined, fragmented, and integrated in adaptive and novel arrangements. The ongoing modification in and design of avatar-to-avatar involvement is often motivated, I am proposing, by a desire to resolve incongruities. The dependent relation of individual cognitive designations and the progression of avatar intimacy in SL seems to require ongoing reflective assessment of the congruence of the social interaction as

it is experienced, and social interaction as it is imagined. SL sexual involvement appears to amplify a simple truth of human relationships: in the context of our evolving involvements, the designations of whom we are, and the world of our possibilities, are in a relentless struggle with incongruity. While providing an overview of the explicit negotiations at work in avatar design and sexual interaction, this essay pays particular attention to the role of congruence and incongruence in the disintegration of avatar relations and identities in SL.

Disintegrating involvement in **Second Life**

Second Life is an online virtual world launched in June 2003 by San Francisco based *Linden Lab. Second Life* "residents" adopt 3D graphical bodies or avatar shapes that range from realistic anthropomorphic representations to fantastic hybrid animals and abstract object forms. Participants may register and engage in SL activities at no fixed fee other than a user-contributed computer and Internet connection, but a significant feature of this virtual world is that it supports user-generated content and an intellectual property rights based creative economy. Among many possibilities, SL avatars conduct business transactions, teach and attend classes, build theme parks and model molecular compounds, join support groups, establish intimate relationships, and engage in cyber sex. By providing users with a metaphorical paradigm with inherent tools for coping

with socio-spatial complexity, the SL avatar interface provides a basic correspondence between users' knowledge of how the world works and its approximate graphical demonstration in cyberspace. *Second Life* is a popular example of an avatar interface that integrates a spatialized, socialized web with the semantic knowledge systems of its users[iii]. This feature turns out to be critical to the emphasis upon the cognitive processes informing design that are theorized in this paper.

[8]   In addition to this basic congruence between material social worlds and the virtual world, SL offers its users the opportunity to surpass the typical constraints of material social worlds. A visit to secondlife.com to download the client software provides new users with a multimedia trailer promoting the advantages of living virtually:

> What is Second Life? A place to connect…A place to shop…A place to work…A place to love…A place to explore…A place to be…Be Different…Be Your Self…Free Your Mind…Change Your Mind…Change Your Look…Love Your Look…Love Your Life" (What is Second Life? n.d.).

[9]   *Second Life* is presented as an agent of material liberation and a world of potential mastery. The freedom to change dimensions of experience and identity, normally resistant to such fluidity in their material manifestations,

is supported by SL's disintegration of embodiment and identity. New users are required to engage immediately in the designation of identity and bodies. The first among these tasks are selections of gender and avatar name. The default conditions of avatar profiles begin with the assumption of anonymity, allowing user discretion in deciding what identifying information to share with others, such as physical appearance, real name, occupation, age, geographical location, etc. The default condition of SL anonymity implies a starting point of disintegrated identity. A new *Second Life* avatar is like a virtual *Humpty Dumpty* trying to put himself together again. The prospect of reconstructing oneself in SL is different though, in the sense that there are innumerable ways to reconstruct the fragments. I experienced the uncertainties of self-construction first hand as I conducted my interviews within the virtual world. As is often the case, another, more experienced avatar provided mentorship to my novice SL avatar:

Avatar: okay, first thing… everything here is about image. you might have noticed that.

Researcher: yes - image

Avatar: you need a better one.

Researcher: cool

Researcher: [changes form] how about this one?

Avatar: no — you need to be neutral — well dressed but… neutral

Avatar: and still be male

Researcher: okay — suggestions?

[10] This avatar kindly put me through a makeover and provided etiquette instructions before taking me on a guided tour of the sex clubs. The disintegration of avatar embodiment begins at "birth." Following the selection of an avatar name from a list of provided surnames, users select from stereotypical physical body types, such as "musician guy, business woman," or "boy next door." The user, changing skin detail, facial features, weight, height, and hair can modify these first avatar forms. Default avatar bodies can also be entirely swapped for new and uniquely designed body forms. The clichéd default avatar bodies, as structural conditions of SL, are an indicator that the disintegration, or reconstruction processes — a glass half full or empty depending upon your point of view — are always partial. This virtual world is not a blank canvas. It comes pre-loaded with graphical metaphors of terrain, bodies, physics, an economy, rules and regulations, and an ideological fantasy ethos, yet not all of these design features are amenable to user variation. In a study of knowledge transfer and social innovation in virtual worlds, Jensen (2007) observes it is often the lack or mismatch of interactive social conventions that forces participants to engage in reflexive strategies:

The first avatar meetings in the Agora-world, and in the awedu

universe as such, created an awareness of not only one's presence, but also of social conventions and communication strategies as these were made explicit simply *by not being there*; or rather, the system did not support the many conventions that are implicit in everyday interactions in the real world. This creates an innovative and explorative awareness of having to overcome problems and constraints (Jensen 2007, 200).

[11] Avatar interaction in virtual worlds engenders an optimism for social connection that cannot be satisfied until one negotiates the absence of conventional means. *Second Life* avatars are *relatively* free to inscribe the conditions of their involvement, yet are constrained by more durable and comprehensive templates. Avatars are hybrid creatures, concentrating human and technological systems. While avatars can fall unscathed from tall buildings, avatars do die when a flesh and blood user dies with his password un-divulged. Avatar performance itself can lag, becoming technologically constrained as the world simulation server resources are overtaxed by too much concentration of avatar traffic and scripting resources. *Second Life* is just one of the innumerable registers for remote social interaction. It too, exists within other designated and integrated material orders. An interesting example of this is the tension that exists between the Pacific Standard Time

zone of SL and the far-flung distribution of its avatar membership; the designation of a virtual communal space is incongruent with the actual diurnal rhythms of a globally distributed membership. Some avatars work, while others sleep, while others play. The temporal distribution of participants is variously designated and integrated at both planetary and virtual world levels.

Avatar: hey wait… what time is your country now

Researcher: 4:38 am

Avatar: eeewwww… you not tired?

Researcher: 4:29 sorry

Avatar: lol

Researcher: yes, but…

Avatar: ok...you better sleep now...

Researcher: I have to work now… so please continue

I encountered this incongruity regularly in my research activities. As I logged-in to SL in the evening, my Italian sex workers were signing off for the night and getting their children off to school.

[12] Avatars are compelled by structural conditions of disintegration to self-design. Their avatar features and information disclosure decisions will affect the quality and type of future involvements in the virtual world and these, in turn, will affect their real life[iv] involvements. The initial user decisions

undertaken to create an identity and stipulate the parameters of information sharing are about design, but also about integration. Designation and integration are therefore the core dimensions, or areas of concern for designing avatar-to-avatar involvement. These concerns are about the *who* and *what* of involvement and the regulation of avatar interactions. Raised in these ongoing processes of designation and integration are a number of questions, including: How much of my life becomes part of your life? What information should be disclosed? How does my real world intersect with my virtual world, how do my multiple worlds — work, family, relationships, virtual relationships, interact or intersect? Is my avatar identity integrated with my real identity? In what way? The following exchange provides a succinct illustration of one such assessment process, while also highlighting the desirability for an emphatic congruence between "Real Life" and second life identities for many SL participants:

> Avatar: At first, I was completely in stealth mode. I didn't tell anyone my RL gender, even my sexual partners but then one of them got serious… and when he found out my RL gender, he was very hurt

> Avatar: I resolved after that to come out to a person before beginning a relationship

[13] It can be assumed that this avatar's intimate partner found her female

gender designation to be congruent with his own heterosexual orientation. Her prior involvement strategy of gender concealment was essential to the instigation and cohesion of this particular partner involvement. Their involvement undergoes an elemental disintegration when the avatar's gender designation is found to be incongruent with the intimate partners' sexual identity designation. For the involvement to continue, the intimate partner would need to re-designate his sexual orientation to include transgender involvement, effectively modifying his worlds of possible involvements. The avatar, in choosing to share her transgender status with future intimate partners, is enacting an emphatic congruence between her real life transgender identity and SL acts of narrative disclosure. In doing so she has opted for a narrated authenticity, at the same time avoiding another highly problematic option of attempting to graphically portray a transgender identity through an avatar body type.

[14] Congruence assessments are a significant variable in the designation of the graphical avatar body and its emphatic correlation to dimensions of self-identity. For some the avatar body must achieve a mimesis of the designer's physical appearance. Even in a realistic representation of the user's real life body there can be a disregard for temporal congruence. It is not uncommon for users to select more youthful versions of their real life appearance to model. Others find embodiment congruence based upon

character and the social signification of gendered body types. This can lead to the suppression of one dimension of embodiment so that other dimensions can be designated. In the following example the avatar suppresses her sex identity to achieve social involvements congruent with her gendered character.

> Avatar: although I am very feminine... I have a sort of male brain in my opinion
>
> Avatar: I am quite rational and bored by many stereotypical female topics... or whatever
>
> Avatar: I am the joker... people feel safe and comfortable joking with a male... more so than a female
>
> Researcher: both male and female?
>
> Avatar: both!
>
> Avatar: As a female if people joked, I'd get IMs [instant messages]... did I hurt your feelings?

Yet others capitalize upon the affordances of embodiment disintegration for the heightened stimulation brought on by emphatic *in*congruence. The following participant recalled lamenting his drought of social interaction in the gay sex clubs where he first presented as a male avatar:

> Avatar: Well I decided fuckit, I'll try being a female avatar
>
> Researcher: ok
>
> Avatar: All of a sudden people were talking to me left and right

Researcher: yes - that's interesting

Avatar: Then I got a little self-conscious for playing a female

Researcher: it bothered you?

Avatar: I wouldn't say bothered, just different

Avatar: Then I received a free penis, and got an idea

Researcher: and what idea did you get after you received your

free penis?

Avatar: wear it… I became a shemale

Researcher: ha!

Avatar: haha

Researcher: and what has been the response?

Avatar: huge… some people border on harassing

[15] Several emphatic congruence assessments are evident in this example. First, the participant's affective review of his virtual social life focused on the incongruence of his desire to become socially involved and his actual involvement experiences. The participant responded to this tension by experimenting with different embodiment presentations, first as a female, and then as a she-male. In each case he engaged in an act of effective designation for desired involvements. His female embodiment, while achieving involvement, produced an incongruity in another dimension. His uneasy self-reflection suggests tension resulting from the breaking apart

of his sense of self and his avatar social presentation. His further experiment as a she-male produced yet another incongruity, this time, an excess of frequency and intensity of social involvement. This participant complained of being harassed in avatar social settings by those curious about she-males. He ultimately responded to these situations by developing designation strategies that involve the use of different avatar bodies and identities for different types of involvement experiences.

[16] The ability for a single user to have multiple avatar accounts and an inventory of different body types and accessories is another feature of avatar embodiment that enables users to create activity specific social identities. Among those interviewed in this study, most had alternate avatar accounts with SL and at least a few alternate avatar bodies for these accounts. These alternate identities[v] can be useful to partition behaviors and identities. As it is with individuals in real life, avatars too may engage in secretive other lives and relationships.

[17] The theory of involvement design as it has emerged in this study conceptualizes two distinct phases in designation processes, an affective mode of designation that evaluates existent and prior states of affairs, and an effective mode of designation that anticipates future states of affairs. These two valences of designation, one reviewing and assessing, the other

anticipating, are constantly being updated and revised as avatars negotiate their involvements. These activities of assessment and planning are characteristic of cognitive processes associated with planning behaviors in general but they become overt in the context of disintegrating virtual worlds. All participants recounted processes of affective designation of identity, reviewing and restating personal qualities, personal history, social character, and sexual disposition. Considerable attention was devoted to assessing the nature of real and virtual worlds, especially how these worlds are arranged and in what ways they are connected. The participants also expressed unique perspectives on social discourses relevant to their intentions. For example, participants reflected various sexual ideologies on cybersex infidelity — these, of course, were integrated with their own interpretations of social discourses of virtuality. These affective designations comprise a type of stocktaking of the involvement affordances and trajectories of the selves and worlds of SL users, one that integrates the unique perceptions of individual participants with socio-cultural discourse. For avatar sex participants, the survey of affordances accomplished by affective designation constitutes a platform to be revised and improvised upon for anticipated involvements and future designations. The revision and improvisation of acts are effective designations.

[18] The process of designing involvement is the integration of affective and effective designations; involvements are always comprised of a hermeneutics of designations and prior involvements. The following deals with improvised cognitive shifts that are explicitly marked by the disintegration of identities and bodies. Here, identity disintegration is found in the negative affective assessment of real life identities, in this case found incongruent with a commitment to master and slave relational dynamics.

> Avatar slave: we cannot be who we really are in RL Sir. We have obligations that we must attend to, so we find what we are missing in RL with each other.

[19] The feeling of inauthenticity expressed here is an emphatic incongruity between this avatar's sexual orientation and worldviews and the constraints of her real life. As an avatar slave she has found a master whose real life marital and career obligations preclude the possibility of actualizing a master and slave way of life, yet together, through their avatar relationship, they have found a way to overlay an authentic sexual orientation in SL with real life[vi]:

> Slave avatar: I do not take being a slave as a game, just for sexual pleasures
>
> Researcher: and that was what some were expecting of you?
>
> Slave avatar: most on here expect that Sir, they are in it for the

kinky sex. I am in it for desires inside myself. I was hoping for a

RL Dom. I was tired of the players Sir

Master avatar: dominance and submission as we practice it is

about control... sex comes into our relationship as it does in any

healthy   relationship,   but   it   is   not   because   of   the

dominance/submission

Researcher: so the dominance and submission is how your lives

are ordered as a couple and your sexual lives are incorporated

into that order

Slave avatar: yes Sir

Master avatar: nods... and that really is who we are in RL, even

if we don't practice it actively... and yes, our sexual lives are

incorporated too

This couple finds in SL a positive opportunity for authentic self-expression
that would be otherwise constrained.

[20] The development or progress of SL sexual relations may also take on
novel formats that would be normatively constrained in real life. The
disintegration of embodiment and the resiliency of virtual embodiment
present unparalleled performance opportunities:

Avatar: I often try to role play

Avatar: like one guy, who likes to kill me, likes to play things like

I am a slave and he a gladiator… sometimes he hunts me on a

jungle isle and sacrifices me in the end on a big pyramid

[21] The incongruence of self-preservation and enactments of a sexualized

and violent death is a turn-on for this avatar who, otherwise, prefers a safe,

retiring real life existence. While the progression of sexual acts is usually

textually mediated, scripted avatar animations or "pose balls" can be

interacted with to produce avatar a wide variety of sex acts and positions.

Often these can take on stereotypical progressions reminiscent of

pornographic media:

Researcher: Can you tell me about your favorite way to have sex

in SL? What experiences do you like the most?

Avatar: First cuddles then a good Blowjob, different Positions,

fucked in all Holes, and a Cumshot in face, like in RL

Researcher: like some people's real life? Is it like your RL?

Avatar: It's the way I do sexual experiences in RL, oh I didn't

mention the cigarette after, and cuddles after...lol

[22] The scripting of SL relationships in conformity to real life regressive

and objectifying stereotypes has been the focus of recent critical studies of

SL sex (Waskul and Martin 2010; Brookey and Cannon 2009). What is of

interest here is that the adoption of stereotypical sexual tropes among

avatars may circumscribe an expected time frame, order and power dynamics of relationships. BDSM (varieties of bondage, dominance, master and slave, sadism, and masochism sexual forms) are usually singled out for manifesting comprehensive orders of power relations, and intensified progressions in sexual involvement, but these scales of time, power, and involvement are nonetheless present in normative heterosexual relationships.

[23] In the play of successive reflection and inference, new involvement designs quickly become the fodder of reflection and are subsequently integrated into new effective designations. The experience of disintegrating identity itself may become the subject of affective designation and congruence assessments and, even here, a positive value may be placed on the incongruence of identity:

> Avatar: No people can say who is it, behind the avatar, but this
> little bit of human being you can see in the written word, it is
> enough to love this part

This avatar's involvements in avatar sex are shaded by her positive assessment of SL's anonymous conditions and the possibility of real connection to be had in mediated intimacy. She plans for involvement based on an expectation of congruence between textually mediated and lasting intimacy.

[24] Mediation presents a specific sort of integration concern for avatar sex participants. The SL interface provides a variety of text, audio, and video communication modalities. These are subject to involvement design considerations and are also subject to congruence assessments. Where concerns for embodiment and identity anonymity coincide, avatars typically prefer text chat and instant messaging modalities. The use of text permits the maintenance of inferred identities and bodies as these need not make visible real life gender, age, ethnicity, etc. Textual mediation is also used to adapt to the conditions of disintegrated embodiment:

> Avatar: The thing about SL sex?
>
> Researcher: yes
>
> Avatar: Is that one needs a good imagination, an ability to write somewhat well and to paint an erotic scenario
>
> Avatar: for me anyway, it is less about the pose balls[vii] and it has been that way with most of my partners… the penis and the pose balls are sort of extras
>
> Researcher: okay
>
> Avatar: I guess if one could write good erotica they are good in bed here

Variously, disintegrated embodiment can be regarded as a constraint or an opportunity for avatar involvement. Narration of embodiment tends to

prolong sexual involvements; it is not unusual for avatar sexual acts to progress over a matter of hours. Although text based communication is dominant, some avatars will use voice-to-voice communication. While this modality renders transparent identifying many features having to do with real embodiment such as sex and gender, language, speaking style and competence, it can have an exhilarating effect for some.

[25] Concerns having to do with expedience, convenience, access, choice, safety, and control emerged as significant factors influencing participant motivation in avatar sex. These concerns can best be summarized under the concept of efficiency for which SL affords the opportunity to easily and safely engage in sexual acts with a world of willing strangers. From the perspective of efficiency concerns, the phenomenon of avatar sex is clearly integrated with the larger socio-cultural background of participants. The integration of cybersex and culture, begins with the immediate living conditions concerning privacy, the presence or absence of family members and significant others, access to technology, and subsequently draws in wider and wider circles of social involvement such as career and work habits, sexual politics, health and safety, political climate and economic conditions. Some of the participants in this study were single mothers who preferred not to date, avoiding the difficulties of managing relationship commitments and childcare. Others had prioritized work and career commitments over

relationship commitments and were utilizing SL as a convenient means of accessing a sexual forum. Participants often cited motivations of transitioning between real life relationships, taking a break from dating in real life, and satisfying sexual desires online. Safety and control were central concerns to many, not having to worry about wasting time on bad dates, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, having unwanted pregnancies, and controlling contact with potential lovers.

> Avatar: I began using SL thinking it was more of a kind of simulation than anything else. I hadn't had any idea of the social aspects.

> Avatar: At the time I was sort of being dangled from a relationship in First Life...my then-lover had skipped off to a distant location and might or might not be coming back, so while I didn't want to get into a committed relationship with someone else, I was lonely for companionship and romance...

> Avatar: Second Life was very congenial for me in that respect, because it was possible to get those things in a very safe, controllable way. Getting involved with someone else in First Life, even as a fling, would have seemed dangerous in terms of possibly offering a permanent relationship...

> Avatar: At the time I thought that a Second Life relationship couldn't possibly lead to anything permanent if I didn't want it

to, and I still more or less feel that way, but I've since seen that

for some other people it can turn into something more

substantial and cross over into First Life. I never wanted that.

[26] For some participants SL presents the opportunity for social sexual

interactions in the context of sexually repressive cultures of family,

nationality, or religion. While the demographics of SL is heavily weighted

with residents from the United States[viii], membership is otherwise distributed

internationally resulting in a diverse mix of sexual cultures. The following

participant reported having had partnered sexual intercourse only twice in

her life and is motivated to work as an avatar escort by factors of access to

available partners and cultural constraints:

Avatar: I'm looking for men who like me very well so I want him

to be my boyfriend or...hubby..or something...lol

Researcher: -- seriously? not

Avatar: yes...you know...I'm 31 years old…I don"t have many

friend in RL and SL too. I don't have a boyfriend

Researcher: so you are looking a little bit

Avatar: yes...I cant find men in my country because...all men

here can marry 4 wives...so...I would like to find someone who

needs love n taking care of when he is old...something like

that…trust is more important in my life

Researcher: men here can be married 4 wives - explain this?

Avatar: 'lol...you should know about Muslim men

As can be seen by the above examples, concern with efficiency can work with personal circumstances and socio-cultural factors, as participants seek ways to satisfy sexual desires in the face of varying constraints.

[27] Disintegration of embodiment forces a re-routing of the risks and rewards of embodied sex and intimacy, often to virtualized models of sexual service and prostitution. Avatar sex escorts typically profess a conflation of transaction reward motivations, financial compensation usually demoted relative to relational and sexual satisfactions and challenges. Here disintegrated embodiment forces an adaptive concentration on more cerebral satisfactions having to do with power:

Researcher: okay- so the money is important?

Avatar: for me, it is a part of the game, gives me a challenge

Avatar: I think if I have the credit card, it is not interesting. I can pay for everything easily…

Avatar: this job makes me think and create fantasies…but now...

to control your imagination is my work ;)

Researcher: To control your client's imagination is your work? Correct?

Avatar: like an escort, yes

Trade in relations of explicit power appears ubiquitous in SL sexual involvements[ix]. Within the anonymous conditions of identity disintegration, sex-work becomes stripped of its consequential social stigma. An avatar sex service provider faces no censure but her own. The avatar designation of sex-worker allows for an abbreviated social negotiation about the kind of involvement one is available to have. In SL, where the bandwidth for involvement congruence can be set to exceedingly precise dimensions, the punctual declaration of one's sexual intentions and stylistic repertoire is a must. Why waste time online meeting the wrong people when you can just declare that you are into gothic bi-furry hunter and prey sex scenarios?

[28] *Second Life* escorts frequently cite the satisfaction of curiosity as another reward motivation for their sex work. Curiosity is certainly localized in the sexual exchange of services but extends toward fascination for the varieties of desire manifest by avatar sex clientele. This is theorized as a mode of affective designation in which individuals partake in the involvement designs of others — a voyeurism of other designations. The experimentation and learning affordances of this mode of socialized affective designation is indicated in the following data:

Avatar: in SL I can do what I never can do in RL

Researcher: nods

Avatar: The most is BDSM

Researcher: this is a practice that you have in SL but not in real life?

Avatar: I learned a lot about it. Since I practice it in SL, I make it for myself in RL too, but only at home and alone, if it is possible

Researcher: tell me about this

Avatar: I have a butt plug, a vibe, ropes and clamps, my chair is an old armchair, I sit on it with my naked ass, on a plastic pad (I write about real life)

Researcher: okay

Avatar: if someone from SL gives me the instructions, I will follow, so far as possible

Researcher: so you have taken the practices you have learned while working as an escort in SL and used them in real life?

Avatar: right. I never have had this idea before :)

[29] The socialized exchange of sexual involvement designations can have the above effect of a limited experimentation. The transaction is expansive in its effective inference of new arrangements of sexual involvements. The voyeurism of other designations may also have a delimiting or boundary-making effect on the effective designations of the recipient. This is indicated

in the following excerpt from an escort who professes a motivating curiosity about the sexual constructs of others:

> Avatar: but I still do get hired for it some
>
> Researcher: cannibalism? -- so your avatar gets eaten?
>
> Avatar: yes
>
> Avatar: I was turned off some because I ran into some real pervs here and their kinks were too much
>
> Avatar: many claim to be RL Doms or subs and RL whores and one guy was part of a RL cannibal group and told me he talked his girlfriend in RL into letting him cut a piece from her side
>
> Researcher: really? How can you be sure?
>
> Avatar: oh you cannot be sure… not at all… but that made me sick

[30] The reflexive effect of others' designations provides boundary cues through assessments of incongruity — an incongruity so disturbing, in this case, as to nauseate the avatar. The delimiting effect of other designations also helps to situate the avatar in an ethical array of erotic involvement designs, and in this case, at least one degree of remove from 'real pervs.' Participation in the involvement designs of others is one of the service objectives of sex work, yet it is a general feature of social involvements and can easily be seen in involvements that require reciprocal involving, such as

friendship and marriage.

Conclusions

The anticipatory or effective designations of avatar sex involvements are adaptive designs to be enacted in the integration of selves and worlds of involvement. For avatar sex participants, involvement designs are active in the negotiation of sexual stimulation, and variously, reciprocal intimacies, transactional flows, erotic progressions, mediated interactions, and socially distributed learning. The integration of wider cultural and social influences upon avatar self-designation and sexual involvement is illustrative of sexual scripting as it is played out in this emergent arena of social interaction:

A social world that requires that we bargain for our identities inevitably trains us to bargain with ourselves. Desire, including the desire for desire, becomes one of the most pervasive currencies for negotiating cross-domain exchanges. The self in becoming a scripted actor becomes its own producer, managing resources, investing in long-term payoffs and short-term cash flow, while becoming its own playwright. Thus while nonerotic motives frequently organize and lead us through our selection of interpersonal sexual scripts, an increasing emphasis upon the erotic pleasure characterizes much of contemporary sexual life not merely in response to the changing content of available

cultural scenarios but as an expression of the very changing

experience of the self (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 108).

How this is constituted depends upon participant congruence assessments

based upon reflexive criteria of their experiential possibilities. Furthermore,

the indications of congruence assessment cited in this essay suggest that the

valence of these affective assessments can be valued as either positive or

negative. The registration of incongruities in avatar sex involvement can be

regarded as affordances, as is often regarded the physical safety of sex

achieved in virtual worlds, or as constraints, such as that presented by the

lack of tactility. Both are the consequence of disintegrated embodiment.

[32] The disintegrated quality of avatar interaction and the subsequent

need to mediate physical and emotional experience through a predominately

text-based exchange has the effect of reducing social interaction to an inter-

psychic level where personal and often secret sexual fantasies can be

exchanged and reciprocally enjoyed. The mental orientation of avatar sex

should not be taken as an elision of physiological sexual arousal and

satisfactions. All participants interviewed in this study gave accounts of

sexual satisfactions varying in intensity among encounters and sexual

partners. For some masturbation and the use of sex toys was a source of

satisfaction but others attributed intense sexual pleasure solely to mediated

communication with their avatar lovers. This interpsychic quality of SL, along

with the virtual recreation of social space, constitutes an effective implosion of social sexual life, one that is characterized by personal metaphor and personal efficiencies. As illustrated above these motivations intersect with the disintegrated social space of SL, resulting in processes of self designing and scripting for social sexual involvement.

[33] In the recreation of virtual sexual opportunities, participants rely upon their personal histories and accumulated knowledge of social sexual behaviors, often reconstituting normative and stereotypical sexual formats and politics. For this reason Brookey and Cannon (2009) are critical of the popular conception that *Second Life* is a place where one can escape regressive sexual politics:

> …we suggest that cyberspace should not be regarded as an environment that moves the user outside of the political and social matrix of gender and sexuality, Cyberspace may allow us to rework those power relationships, but we cannot assume that liberation is obtained there, nor can we overlook the instances that clearly reproduce traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and willful sexual violence (Brookey and Cannon 2009, 160).

This study concurs with the observation that SL sexual scripting tends to recycle RL social sexual scripts and that these are problematic in many ways, reproducing conformist and normative scripts and inculcating

repressive and objectifying online behaviors. Yet, the recycling often *works*;

I was often deeply moved by the tenderness, emotion, and commitment I

encountered among my interview participants, as I was also impressed by

the ingenuity and power of their eroticism. It would be accurate to say that

these, too, were relational values and embodied intensities imported from

real life to SL.

[34] The problem of regressive social constructs highlights an important

contribution cognitive theory can make to social constructivist theories of

sex. The social determination of sex that figures prominently in the

interactionist sexual scripting theory of Simon and Gagnon (Gagnon and

Simon 2005; Simon and Gagnon 1986) and in the discursive power invested

in sexuality in Foucault's (1975; 1978) historical analyses can be further

qualified by such cognitive theory. The power of the socio-cultural theories

of sex is their ability to account for the inseparable actions of individuals and

cultures. Recent studies support this view and perhaps help to de-demonize

these processes by theorizing their necessary and inevitable constitutive

functions at the personal and subpersonal levels. Theorists of social

cognition are beginning to assemble recent experimental findings into a

plausible model of human agency and social space (Anderson 2003; Bruun

and Langlais 2003; Metzinger 2004; Gallese 2007; Bratman 2000; Clark

2009; Dennet 1996; Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1992; Donald 1991;

Tomasello 1999). Simon and Gagnon had already hit upon this idea in their writings on sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 2005; Simon and Gagnon 1986) in a critique dating back to their discussion of Merton's writing on anomie (Simon and Gagnon 1976). They have suggested that it is not possible to revert to 'natural' values and ideals; these don't exist. Rather, deviant and private subcultures that have eschewed the typical pathways to socially sanctioned rewards have only the materials of social culture at their disposal to recycle:

> Ontogenically rooted deviations from prevailing cultural scenarios tend to be limited to a universe largely created by such cultural scenarios, i.e., the application of conventional sexual meanings to unconventional sexual objects or the expression of unconventional motives through conventional sexual activities (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 105).

The recognition of the recursive character of social variance and person modulation within the context of cybersex is succinctly formulated in Waskul and Martin (2010): "The greater agency to explore and reconfigure (re)presentations of self, body, and desire most often take the form of a "power and freedom to define oneself in accordance with cultural standards" (Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 2000, 391). In their forthcoming ethnographic study of SL sex, Waskul and Martin (2010) conclude that the

defining feature of avatar sex is a mode of play — a "ludic(rous)" enactment that improvises upon cultural scripts governing "civilized" sex:

> Order and stability are the main characteristics of what Giddens (1993) calls the "pure" relationship, which emerged in the late nineteenth century and based on the idea that a durable emotional tie could bind people together. Parallel to the pure relationship is the counter trend of "plastic" sexuality (Giddens 1993)––ludic sex-based relationships that are free of commitment, reproduction, and other closely connected projects of the self. In contrast to the order and stability of the "pure" relationship, the disorderly and often "plastic" nature of ludic(rous) *Second Life* sex is about an "indiscretion for the civilized body" (Waskul and Vannini 2007, 243).

The disintegrated quality of SL contributes to the *non-serious* quality of these "ludic" interactions. By 'non-serious' I don't cast a judgment upon the meaningfulness of avatar sex, but rather underline that attribute of virtual involvements having to do with their potential for remaining relatively inconsequential when compared to embodied acts. The disintegration of agency, embodiment, and identity afforded by the virtual environment mimics a speculative mode of human cognition: that is, the socially oriented cognitive capacity to mentally rehearse and anticipate the actions of others

and ourselves in a way that is disconnected from actualizing them (Gallese

2007; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Gallese and Lakoff 2005).

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[i] The grounded theory method consists of inductive procedures to conceptualize and theoretically model the core processes indicated by the data (Glaser and Strauss 1968; Glaser 1978),

[ii] See Anderson (2003), Varela (1992) and Bruun (2003) on enacted and embodied cognitive theory.

[iii] See Hutchins, Hollan, and Norman (1985) and Shneiderman (1982; 1997) on user semantic knowledge and direct manipulation interfaces.

[iv] I acknowledge the term "real life" is problematic and consider *Second Life* to be part of real life. Most avatar participants use the terms abbreviated forms RL and SL.

[v] In avatar jargon, an alternate avatar accounts is referred to as an 'alt.'

[vi] The blending of real life and *Second Life* is conceptualized as "diffused life" in Waskul and Martin (2010).

[vii] "Pose balls" is *Second Life* jargon for scripted animations. For avatar sex, these animations will produce an astonishing variety and inventiveness of positions and acts.

[viii] SL is comprised of over 40% of residents of the United States, followed by 9% German and 7% UK residents. See "The Second Life Economy — Third Quarter 2009 in Detail" for further statistics.

[viii] BDSM, in its many flavors, is a popular involvement design among avatars. Although I suspect that consensual power play is also driven by a premise of disintegrated identity and the potential for incongruity that is unique to SL relationships, the study of power in virtual world involvements is an area that warrants a specifically dedicated future research.

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