

Amanda Grainger

April 5<sup>th</sup> 2007

### **Crossing Gender Lines? Second Life's Replica of Reality**

Second Life is an outlet for the subversive and the commercialized. The target audience of Second Life is unclear; the focus presumably surrounds stereotypically female practices, even though men dominate the gaming world. The key to the game is that it provides the opportunity to break the barriers of traditional society. Consequently, when presented with a clean slate for which participants can mold and fantasize anonymously, consumerism and sex is born. The blatant sexualized environments and the participation of female characters in these sexual worlds is disconcerting. Either women have found an outlet for subversive sexual practices, or men are using virtual women for their own pleasure with freedom from repercussion. In her article, *Feminist Internet Studies*, van Zoonen presents a limited view of women's participation in the Internet that foreshadows a "digital divide", where women's role in the internet surrounds relationships and shopping (Van Zoonen). Second Life illustrates where van Zoonen's argument goes wrong, where she misses the opportunity for women to develop and participate in technology. Unfortunately, although the game has the ability to be a new alternative progressive life, Second Life ultimately falls short of being anything more than a gendered environment for sex and shopping. Many of the sexual fantasies and sex worlds manipulate and objectify women. Second Life players earn Linden Dollars for many activities within the game. The game crosses the line between fantasy and reality at the exchange of Linden Dollars for US currency. By inferring that Linden Dollars are real dollars, Linden products and services then become real products and services. The innovation within this concept is overshadowed by the elements of the game that should not be real, such as the violent sexual acts that occur in multiple worlds. The sexual and commercialized world in Second Life is ultimately both empowering and

objectifying in its representation of women. The game provides women an opportunity to embrace the technological world and participate, but the representations of women promote heterosexual male values that discourage progressive feminine ideologies.

Second Life is an innovative 3D world that facilitates a legitimate new life—one where people can earn a living by doing anything they please. The game has a strong focus on capitalism, where players participate in a daily exchange of goods and services for Linden Dollars. Inevitably, huge media companies have recognized the potential for large revenues and have set up shop within the Second Life community. Advertisers and big name companies are flocking to the online game, seeking an opportunity to earn huge profits through product placement. The focus on buying and selling is a strange occurrence for a video game. Second Life's critical acclaim is attributed to its unique approach to game design, mainly surrounding the strong presence of user-generated content. Second Life participants can contribute to any aspect of the game by drawing and manipulating avatars, homes, shopping malls, accessories, clothing, art, drinks and more. Second Life's website promotes the game as a "3D online digital world imagined, created, and owned by its residents" (Secondlife.com). Anything tangible in Second Life is likely drawn by a Second Life player, and is usually bartered or sold for Linden Dollars. To set-up a character in the game, users are given a basic, pre-designed avatar to mold. Players can change any aspect of the avatar design, from skin color, height, weight, age, body structure, hair color and clothing. The avatars travel through different "worlds", mostly designed and monitored by other Second Life players. To move within worlds, users "teleport" by double-clicking on the title of any world sought out through the games "search" function. Second Life staff, also known as Linden Staff, post events—a correlated list of the most popular places, and maps for users to search and roam through the hundreds of user-created worlds.

Gamers have the option of selecting either a male or female avatar when joining Second Life. A few minutes of game play will indicate that many gamers choose female characters.

Female avatars are everywhere. They roam the stores, decorate the houses, strip in the nightclubs and are available for sex. Second Life's self-reported statistics reveal that 58% of Second Life players are male (Linden). Since a majority of gamers are men, the prominence of female avatars suggests that the purpose of the female player is centered around the male gaze. Anne-Marie Schleiner compares gender-crossing in video games to the act of dressing up in drag. With specific relation to the character Lara Croft in Tomb Raider, Schleiner argues

Over the course of the game, the construction of the player's feminine identity emerges from the reflective connectivity between the player's identification with the avatar's movements in the game space, (a sort of alternate "mirror" reality.) Rigid gender roles are broken down, allowing the young boys and men who constitute the majority of Tomb Raider players to experiment with "wearing" a feminine identity, echoing the phenomenon of gender crossing in Internet chat rooms and Mud's (Schleiner).

Second Life does not break down gender roles—it embraces them. Although male players can select and manipulate female avatars, the activities that many female avatars are seen conducting are traditional feminine roles such as shopping, dancing, flirting, and providing sexual pleasure. However, the game is not at fault for the traditional gender roles—gamers are. The user generated content, online chats, and the gamers themselves rule and define the messages sent within Second Life. Thus the problem of a traditionally gendered game does not lie in the game creators, but in society's acceptance of these roles in the first place. VanZoonen argues that to classify a gendered internet, either by female or male standards, missing the possibilities of the Internet to be both. She explains,

The same holds for feminist perspectives on the Internet: the nature of the technology is such that the claim of a one dimensional gendered practice of the Internet, be it feminine (as in female communication) or masculine (as in male domination), is bound to miss the rich diversity of gender articulations on and with the net (Van Zoonen 71).

Second Life misses opportunities to be progressive in its representation of gender roles. Avatars in Second Life can fly, a feature human beings lack. It would be fantastic to see Second Life apply other non-traditional features to avatar design and abilities, such as the creation of a non-gendered avatar, in order to break down traditional gender roles and embrace a new world, a second life, that is not defined by any societal constructs.

Second Life's ingenuity is based around shopping and capitalism. Market forces drive the real world economy, and in Second Life, money, advertising, and shopping defines much of the game's identity. A free version of Second Life can be downloaded from the company's website. However, in order to be a true participant in Second Life's culture, the game begins with a monthly subscription membership. For \$9.95 US a month, users are given a \$1000 Linden dollar signing bonus and a \$300 Linden Dollar stipend a week. The weekly income allows gamers to buy and trade goods as they would in the real world; it facilitates shopping, gambling, down payments on property, and overall worth in the game.

The line between fantasy and reality is blurred through the collection and trading of Linden Dollars. Second Life makes it possible to abandon real life responsibilities and be reborn in Second Life. The goods and services that are traded for real US currency in Second Life validates and legitimizes the practices and social structure within it. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2006, *Business Week* reported one successful Second Life player's income at an estimated \$250,000 US. Interestingly, the article profiled Anshe Chung, a female player, who was one of the first players recognized for earning huge amounts of US currency through the game. *Business Week* reported that: "Chung's owner, who prefers to keep her real name private to deter real-life intrusions [says], 'This virtual role-playing economy is so strong that it now has to import skill and services from the real-world economy'(My Virtual Life). The game transcends the video game genre by allowing players to successfully generate virtual income and translates that income into legitimate US currency. Chung, a female player, is an example of the empowering elements within the Second Life community. Women can join this community as successful business strategists, earn a lot of money, and be a real participant in the gaming community.

Major media companies are flocking to Second Life in hopes of capturing the online community's attention. The game does not directly target a specific gender, but instead advertises itself as a completely new 3D virtual community for all. The opportunity for

advertising initiatives is vast. Instead of Linden staff creating virtual products for players to buy and sell, media conglomerates such as AOL Time Warner, NBC and CBS have joined Second Life and created content that integrates branding into the virtual community (Wallenstien). The game is not about luring women to video games by appealing to popular shopping activities, but instead companies are infiltrating the game with product placement in hopes of generating income in reality. Second Life is earning profits through the increasing number of monthly subscriptions.



Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates the 3D advertising designs and the success of product placement within the game. Companies such as Procter and Gamble create 3D vending machines such as the one shown above, and invite players to purchase virtual chips. By doing so, players hand over their Linden Dollars, which can then be converted to US Dollars, to Procter and Gamble for nothing more than a 3D drawing of a Pringles can. The purpose of buying virtual chips is meaningless. The exchange of money for virtual goods is intriguing though. If you purchase Pringles in the game, is it the same as purchasing Pringles in real life? To Procter and Gamble

who earned the profit from the purchase, it is. To carry this example further, if purchasing Pringles is legitimate, is paying for sex also legitimate?



The prominence of shopping undoubtedly has feminine connotations associated within. In a quick search through some of the game's most popular malls reveals that most of the clothing and avatar designs are intended for females, such as the figure shown below. A closer reading of the female clothing reveals designs intended for male pleasure, such as

the prominence of lingerie, leather, and school girl outfits. Although the game may appear to provide a variety of goods for purchase, many of the clothing items for sale are created to make female characters sexy; leopard print skirts, revealing tank tops, and even ballroom gowns appeal to a idealized feminine image that is not progressive or empowering. The overflowing amount of feminine-styled goods presents a stereotypical and simplistic idea of female leisure activities, inferring that a woman's role in online communities and the Internet is little more than a way to participate in consumerist tendencies.

Lisbet van Zoonen examines women's role on the internet in her article *Feminist Internet Studies*. She argues that a woman's role online is still secondary to men, and that their uses of the Internet closely resemble that in the reality of North American society, activities such as shopping, emotional support, communication, acts of caring and personal relationships. Van Zoonen argues that there is a potential digital divide, where a woman's role online will be limited to the superfluous acts of a modern day housewife:

The US situation shows us what is to come: women are now using the Internet in equal

numbers as men, but they are usually targeted as consumers and online shoppers. We may be moving towards a situation then, in which “the digital divide” in the Western world does not express itself in terms of numbers of women and men having access to the Internet, but in terms of the uses to which the Internet is put by women and men (van Zoonen 68).


By highlighting the potential “divide”, van Zoonen only contributes to the stereotype of the female online shopper. Although at the surface Second Life appears to promote van Zoonen’s argument that women’s role online is rooted in shopping, the game contradicts this notion. It does so in two ways; firstly, assuming that men play video games more often than women, clearly there is a very large male interest in online shopping. The paradox is interesting; 58% of Second Life players are men, but Second Life has an overflowing amount of clothes for women. Secondly, Second Life provides opportunities for participation in consumerism beyond mindless shopping; female and male gamers can create their own virtual store with virtual lines of clothing, art, hair designs or accessories. The element of user-generated content empowers women to serve a participatory, active role in this virtual society, not a passive one.

It should be noted that van Zoonen also argues that by assuming that women’s role online is rooted in consumerism, it neglects other extremely important functions that women serve in the community, such as their roles in the career world, activism, intellectual thought and personal hobbies (van Zoonen 70). Second Life takes van Zoonen’s point beyond just the mention of women’s “other” roles in society and breaks down the notion of a “digital divide”. Men and women are free to play any gender, and participate in the online culture in a multitude of forms, beyond shopping. Second Life empowers women not because the game provides the ability to join communities and shop, but because female players can control and manipulate content and showcase technological and graphic design talent that equally competes with male user-generated content.

Name	Traffic
CLUB T-REXX The Classiest Club i...	20878
! Dark City, Underworld- Dark Angels ...	20767
! Viper Room XXX Club- Casino,Sex,F...	20608
*~* Club Crobar *~* HOT, FLIRTY & ...	20469
A LOVERS PLA...	20399
Hells Kitchen	20292
PURE M...	20237
! Jokers Casino L\$3/10 min Camping	20093
[GYC] - Gay Yiffy Club	20046
Bondage Playground	19700
! Kittens Lesbian Erotica - LESBI...	19236
Talmon	19205
\$3/10 Camp No Code 1 Virtual Game...	19013
Praia Abrico	18936
*MYSTIQUE DESIGN...	18931
House of V	18799
Twisted Orchid Fetish Adult Club	18607
A Pine Valley Casino and Strip Club	18500
DarkHeat Village~Darkheat Designs...	18454
	18261
The PinkPussy Cat Strip Club & Mall/...	17657
\$3/10 Camp No Code 2 Virtual Game...	17191
! ace of clubs adult room	16972
ShowGirls Entertainment Complex=S...	16916

100 found

[Next >](#)



DarkHeat Village~Darkheat Designs~Deelish-ous Designs

Sex, orgy, bondage, free sex , bdsm, castle, dungeon, roleplay, fuck, fun, church, forced sex , fetish, porn, graveyard, date

Traffic: 18454, Area: 65536 sq. m.

Erotica Estates 120, 10, 25 (Mature)

[Teleport](#) [Show on Map](#)

Although the game has a strong design element that empowers women, there is an equally strong sexual world that negates the progressive elements within this virtual community. Second Life suffers from an identity crisis. The game surrounds itself in a world of stereotypically female practices, such as shopping and “dressing up”, but the dominant sexual world implies a strong level of eroticism geared primarily towards men. Abnormal practices within Second Life do not surround gender representation; they surround the prominence of sexual activity. To find sex in Second Life, all it takes is a simple keyword search or to browse over Second Life’s “Popular Places”. In a review of the ten most popular worlds in Second Life to visit (measured by how many players are in each world) on March 20<sup>th</sup> 2007, the top ten that appeared were sexually explicit in nature. Players can participate in sexual acts in a number of ways. They can draw character add-ons, such as penis’ and dildos to be used in animated sex acts. To perform sex acts, players click on round “pose balls”. When a pose ball is selected, control of the avatar is released to the animation design.

Moreover, the female avatars who have sex are not accurate representations of women. It is disappointing that although players can draw avatars in any shape, color or form desired, most female avatars are hyper-skinny with long, flowing hair and big breasts. The game would be much more convincing as a progressive movement towards a second, or different life if there were realistic representations of women having sex.

Although Second Life is demeaning to women in its allowance of virtual sexual assault and archaic gender roles, it also can provide an outlet for female empowerment. Anne-Marie Schleiner also suggests that female avatars are the object of male gaze and that most avatars are modeled after men (Schleiner). Although Second Life may be an outlet for sexual arousal in men, it can also be a sexual outlet for women. Women who want to explore sexual fantasies and experiment with sexual pleasure certainly have the opportunity to do so in Second Life. The strong prevalence of female avatars suggests that some women are playing Second Life and are enjoying the sexual conversations and visual representations of sex. If a female player finds pleasure in the sexual world of Second Life, it should be embraced, not criticized. Van Zoonen worries about the representation of women online. She contends that,

In addition, in terms of '*texts*' and '*representations*' the Internet is also not simply a women's haven. Although there are few systematic analyses of the representations and constructions of gender on the Internet, there is enough evidence about (child) pornography, right wing extremism, sexual harassment, aiming and other unpleasantness to disclaim any utopian vision of the Internet as an unproblematic feminine environment (van Zoonen 68).

Van Zoonen does not allow women to enjoy the pleasures of the Internet. Second Life is an example of life; there are examples of "child pornography, sexual harassment and unpleasantness", but there is also an opportunity for feminine sexual arousal. If the Internet and video games are a realistic representation of our world, then presumably the negatives that accompany society will also be present. Instead of lashing out at the representations of the Internet, van Zoonen should be upset with the existence of these negative social forces, not with

the online world for displaying them.

Second Life empowers women, but it also glorifies objectification and abuse. It provides a lawless environment where players can explore life without governmental or societal rule. However, when presented with the opportunity to be subversive or experimental, the game falls short of being much more than a replica of the society we already live in. As a sociological experiment, what does this game say about our culture? When given the opportunity to create a utopist environment, all human beings can contribute is sex, violent and an overwhelming urge to shop. The game does allow women to step out of their comfort zone and explore sexual worlds and language in an anonymous and creative environment which they may have previously self-selected themselves out of. Second Life also adheres to traditional gender roles and stereotypical notions of the woman. For the most part, the fashion options and sexual worlds suggest that the material is intended for the male gaze. The sexual worlds are not censored, they are violent and present an unrealistic fantasy aspect of sexual relationships that create unreal expectations and reinforce violence against women. It is not surprising that the sexual worlds in Second Life are offensive, especially since law does not govern those creating worlds. It can be argued that Second Life merely represents the real world—it would be naïve to assume that S&M, bondage, orgies and adultery do not take place in reality. In order for Second Life to truly be innovative and garner the attention of mass audiences, it needs to do more than attract marketers and promote stereotypes. It would be truly subversive to see Second Life form an alternate reality that is not a replica of our current social roles, which do nothing for the progression of women's roles in technology.

Works Cited

Linden, Lee. "State of the Virtual World – Key Metrics, January 2007". Second Life Blog., Feb 9 2007 <http://blog.secondlife.com/2007/02/09/state-of-the-virtual-world-%E2%80%93-key-metrics-january-2007/>. March 24 2007.

"My Virtual Life". Business Week. May 1 2006.

[http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06\\_18/b3982001.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_18/b3982001.htm) March 24 2007

Schleiner, Anne-Marie. "Does Lara Croft wear Fake Polygons?"

[www.opensorcery.net/lara2.html](http://www.opensorcery.net/lara2.html)

"Second Life". March 24 2007. <Secondlife.com>

Van Zoonen, Lisbet. "Feminist Internet Studies". Feminist Media Studies, Routledge;

Vol. 1(1) 2001.

Wallenstein, Andrew. Hollywood Hot for Second Life – But are virtual worlds for real. The

Hollywood Reporter. Feb 13 2007

[http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content\\_display/television/features/e3i49998ef2b580e2b5461e3dfb1faedb43](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/television/features/e3i49998ef2b580e2b5461e3dfb1faedb43)

8ef2b580e2b5461e3dfb1faedb43)