Avatar: Constructing the Body in an Online Virtual World

Charlie Cavaliero

'If you are trying to dance alone luv, you are using the wrong ball… unless you were trying to dance a couples dance I would use the blue one above the stage.'

I had just arrived in *Muddy's Music Café*, a café that, I had been reliably informed, was an excellent place to meet new people and make friends. I was standing alone on the edge of the dance floor trying to work out how to dance; everybody else was moving to the music and I wanted to fit in. I was hoping that if I were able to seamlessly join in the dancing, I would appear less like I was new to *Second Life* and that I knew what I was doing. After several failed attempts at getting myself dancing, someone told me where I was going wrong: apparently I was clicking on the *wrong* dance ball. Eventually, after a few more tries I managed to find the *right* ball which allowed me to get my body moving. Unfortunately the song that was now playing was a slow number and I was giving everyone in the bar a great rendition of Saturday Night Fever. My 'newbie' status had been thoroughly confirmed, nevertheless I received a few compliments for my enthusiasm.

Are we ever truly in control of our own bodies, how they look, how they behave? Or like the ball in Muddy's Music Café, is there something else that decides these things for us?

Through fieldwork undertaken in the online virtual world *Second Life*, the body will be re-examined as something through which our minds and societies express and represent themselves.

'Virtual' Reality?

I would first like to discuss a couple of terms that need clarification in order for this project to be successful:

What is an Avatar?

The Avatar is the primary way by which users experience and negotiate *Second Life.* An Avatar, in its most basic form, is a three dimensional, pictorial figure (not necessarily human), which signifies one's presence in *Second Life*. It is through an Avatar that users explore, communicate, shop and work. In effect, when using *Second Life* your Avatar is representative of *you*. It is through an Avatar that 'virtual' and 'real life' relationships are mediated simultaneously; it is how you experience 'real life' people, and how 'real life' people experience you. It becomes the "modality through which residents experienced virtual self hood" (Boellstorff 2008).

Figure 1. My Avatar (image by Author).

What is reality?

"Second Life is the leading 3D virtual world. It's a space where you can be whoever you'd like, build and sell whatever you can imagine, and have fun with others from all over the globe while you explore unique virtual environments, listen to live music performances, play games, shop in the world's largest user-generated virtual goods economy, and much more" (Linden Lab n.d.).

Fundamentally anything that is possible in 'real life' can, in some form, be achieved in *Second Life*. However, *Second Life* remains classed as a 'virtual' world, it exists purely in an intangible form and so is considered less true, less actual, less real.

Thus physicality seems to have become the most crucial characteristic when, in the West, we need to decide what constitutes reality. Yet, does the fact that when I walk around in *Second Life* and cannot feel the ground under my feet, taste the air on my tongue or smell the sea, mean that these things do not exist?

Reality should not require physical characteristics in order to prove its existence. Instead reality should be seen as being dependent on, and mediated through, the individual. We cannot say something is not 'real' based upon our own opinion of its existence. Indeed Friedrich Nietzsche argued that each language represents a separate virtual reality (Poster 1998), inhabited only by the people who speak it. So, just because I cannot speak Arabic does not mean that I doubt its 'reality'. Therefore, virtual reality can be viewed as "the hallucination of heaven, the peyote vision, the dionysiac stupor. It is the play, the novel, the opera, any system devised for losing ourselves in another world" (Schwartz 1996: 362); each one of these things is real to the individual who experiences it, regardless of any characteristics, present or absent, it may have.

In relation to my fieldwork, it appears that residents of *Second Life* experience the worlds on both sides of the computer screen as being 'real'. So much so that elements of the online world seem to have agency over the physical world, as an informant called Eileen pointed out to me;

I don't spend a lot of time on alts[1] anymore. I have discovered that after not too much time, life happens. Which is to say the avatar starts to make it's own circle of friends and have interactions with others unique to that avi [avatar] which in turn effect emotion and shape the personality every bit as much as it would for any person in the tangible world. They also become a part of other people's worlds in SL [Second Life].

The Avatar affects the relationships the physical user establishes, just as much as the user affects those of the Avatar, if aspects of *Second Life* are able to shape 'real life', surely then, it must be 'real'.

It seems prudent, as I have now introduced an informant, to discuss my fieldwork methods. I have attempted to conduct this project based upon the principals of participant observation, albeit in its most rudimentary of forms. I spent time creating my Avatar, I participated and observed in the everyday interactions involved with a residency in *Second Life*, I spoke with other residents and aimed to catch a glimpse of this world within my computer screen. My journey into *Second Life* was just like any other user only I had research intentions. However, due to limited time I was unable to establish the 'in-world' relationships I would require in order to gain the trust of many residents, trust which I would need in order to talk to them about this project. This problem was quickly pointed out to me by a resident named cymidei: "many people here are not too open to much probing into their lives, especially their first lives...other types of probing is more common."

---

[1] Most Users have one primary Avatar, however users may create multiple Avatars on their account, these Avatars are called *alts.*

In order to overcome this relatively fundamental problem I began to explore the *Second Life* community forums. Using the forums as an intermediary allowed my questions and queries to reach a large number of *Second Life* residents and also allowed them to only reply with the information they were willing to provide about themselves. As these forums are only available to residents of *Second Life* I have no problem in including what was written there in this project. In fact, the forums provided me with an excellent resource and many insights into *Second Life*.

Therefore my fieldwork and, consequently, this project, consist of 'in-world' observations and conversations, as well as replies to my posts on the *Second Life* community forums.

Mind vs. Body: Readjusting The Cartesian Dualism.

René Descartes in *Meditations* famously separated the mind from the body, claiming that the mind/soul—Descartes does not distinguish between the two—is what constitutes the person, whereas the body is a separate physical entity to which the mind is intimately joined (1996).

Such a dichotomy proves interesting when applied to the body in terms of *Second Life.* If the mind is separable from the body, this could mean that when using *Second Life* a person's mind is transplanted into the body of their Avatar, thus recreating the 'physical' mind-body system but in a virtual form. The Avatar mind-body system must then be considered as constituting that person.

After logging out of *Second Life,* having spent time 'in-world', I often noticed a period where I needed to readjust to being back in my physical body. I could no longer fly or teleport[2] to wherever I wanted to go, thus I had to become re-accustomed to using my legs. Furthermore, my perception of time had been distorted considerably; I would spend several hours 'in-world' and be surprised to find how much 'real life' time had passed. It felt like during my time 'in-world' I had, to

---

[2] Other than walking these are the main ways one navigates around *Second Life*.

some extent, 'become' my Avatar. My feelings, movement, conversations, senses had all be devoted to whatever my Avatar was doing at the time, my mind had been disregarding my physical body in favour for that of the Avatar.

However, splitting mind from body in this way reduces the body to a neutral inert form which is only animated, and therefore useful, when a mind/soul is present within it. Therefore, the human body is rendered as "simply an object of understanding, or an instrument of the rational mind, a kind of vehicle for the expression of a reified social rationality" (Jackson 1983: 329).

Instead of denying the importance of corporeality, we should possibly seek to establish a 'local phenomenology' of the body, which would allow the acknowledgement of how one "experiences—at the level of consciousness, mind, and body-being in, and living in, the world" (Halliburton 2002: 1125). In this way, the mind and the body could be considered as having differentiated roles depending on the experience the individual is engaged in. Taking this approach in relation to *Second Life,* it could be argued that an Avatar can provide a mind/soul with an alternative, yet simultaneous means of experiencing 'real life' and *Second Life* worlds. In other words rather than the person being split into mind vs. body, these two entities could be viewed as being in dialogue with each other, constantly readjusting their balance to suit a situation.

This idea seems well summarised by what Irene told me,

I use different avatars for different personajes, different characters. For me the avatar is not only a "look" (shape skin, outfit...), it is a course of action, a character with a way of being and relating with others different from my other personalities. I think one of my 'characters' is very similar to my RL [real life] *personality. But I have no problem 'living' my other characters.*

The mind is not limited by the boundaries of the body and the body is not controlled by the functions of the mind.

From Neophyte to Avatar

The concept of the body as a site of manipulation will now be examined. The body in *Second Life* appears to be built through a number of *rites de passage*. These practices of initiation appeared to me, to be composed of various stages through which new users had to pass in order for them, and their Avatars, to be successful in *Second Life*.

The initiation process begins with the creation of a *Second Life* account; with this account comes the choice of your first Avatar, which must be chosen from a limited number of stock 'newbie'[3] Avatars. Indeed when you first arrive 'in-world' with your new Avatar you are automatically transported to a place called 'Orientation Island': it is here where you can learn all the basic controls of *Second Life*. Orientation Island could very easily be seen as a space of liminality; it is not part of the physical world or fully part of *Second Life*, it is hidden from view, it is reserved specifically for new users and, once you leave, you may never return. This very much resembles elements of what Turner describes in his analysis of Ndembu initiation rituals; "The Neophytes are sometimes said to 'be in another place'. They have physical but not social 'reality', hence they have to be hidden" (Turner 1987: 8). Thus, using a 'newbie' Avatar and being on Orientation Island are clear indicators to other residents that one is new to *Second Life*, that one is a Neophyte.

---

[3] Term for a new user of *Second Life*

Figure 2. The Body editor window. Users can control exactly how their body appears through the use of the adjustment sliders (image by Author).

Once you have left Orientation Island the next stage in becoming a resident is the modification of one's *Second Life* body. People are continually judged on the appearance of their Avatar, and thus residents lavish time and money in order to perfect the look of it. It seems the ultimate goal of this *Second Life* initiation process is to be accepted 'in-world' by way of having an Avatar which people will want to talk to: in other words an Avatar which is attractive. As a conversation with chloeelectra revealed;

I think that most people tend to create avatars based on what they think it can be attractive, what they think others may find attractive…After getting some kind of feedback (positive or negative) they improve their appearance based on what others think of them.

I too felt myself falling into this mind-set; I figured that more people would be willing to talk to me if my Avatar was attractive.

So it appears that, much like other initiation rituals which aim to create a functioning member of society, the rituals of constructing the body in *Second Life* aim to create exemplary representations of what society deems ideal. Thus the body and society enter into a cyclical system where "everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolises everything else" (Douglas [1966] 1978: 122).

To illustrate this point I wish to describe such a cyclical system. Biologically the amount of visible fat on a woman can indicate her sexual receptiveness, thus women with large breasts and buttocks are considered to be more receptive and therefore more likely to bear offspring. Such visual indicators, then directly correlate with what society judges to be desirable in a mate, or attractive (Grammer 1998).

The Avatar in *Second Life* is constructed in relation to the same societal preferences. chloeelectra recounted a story to me which seems to exemplify this,

I even had an argument with someone because I didn't want to change my avatar's shape to have big boobs… It was a guy of course who said my avi looks great but i needed a boob job.

Thus, through the process of initiation the body is moulded by society's ideals, consequently manipulating how the body is then constructed in society. The desire to fit society's expectations can take extreme forms, for example an informant told me,

My avatar is currently pregnant & I have tried to increase her tummy size realistically. I'm getting pretty big!! Since its a pain to edit clothing to fit every time I increase my tummy size a few %.

This resident demonstrates the lengths in which users are willing to go in order to meet societal ideals, she is pregnant and therefore feels the need to change her Avatar to conform to what people would expect to see in a pregnant woman.

In the transformation from a Neophyte to initiated Avatar it seems that societal ideals are brought into focus; it is predominantly during this time of clarity that one can choose to adhere or confront them.

Having first chosen to use the community forums as a means of asking residents questions, they in fact, provided me with further information about another process of initiation in *Second Life*. As one posts and replies to threads on the forums, you are afforded new ranks that signify your progression through *Second Life*. With each rank comes rewards, increased opportunities and power, during my time using the *Second Life* forums I progressed from 'resident' to 'honoured resident', however the highest rank that can be achieved is that of a 'helper.' Such a rank allows the user to write articles providing other residents with their knowledge about the intricacies of *Second Life*. A 'helper' then is usually someone who has been using *Second Life* for a long time and who is an authority on all things *Second Life*.

From this exploration into how a new user goes about creating their Avatar, using *Second Life* and the limitations and controlling factors that are involved in these processes, it could be argued that the body is a site on constant construction. Construction, which is predominantly founded in and controlled by pre-existing social values. These values are continually manifested by society, thus the body could be seen as a social allegory, as a way of crystalizing social ideals.

Conclusion

Through this exploration of *Second Life*, ideas about the body and its relationships with the mind, reality and society have been scrutinized. From my brief fieldwork it seems to me that the body is dynamic and crucial to a number of social systems. The mind and the body cannot be split as easily as Descartes assumed; instead the two form a system that is constantly shifting and adapting to given situations. In *Second Life,* the Avatar provides the mind-body system with an alternative method of experience, an experience that is based upon 'real life' and 'virtual life' at the same time.

The construction of the body is also explicitly involved with the formation of society. The body is created in the image of the dominant society it is present in, thus in *Second Life* Avatars take on the appearance of the ideals of the western world. As a means of producing this idealized body, initiation practices are put in place, easily facilitating the user in constructing it.

Therefore, through *Second Life* I was able to view, in real time, the formation of bodies and attempt to understand the conventions, constraints and causality involved in their making.

Bibliography

Boellstorff, T. (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist explores the Virtually Human.*

Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Descartes, R. (1996) *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and*

Replies. Revised Edition. Translated by Cottingham, J. Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press.

Douglas, M. ([1966] 1978) *Purity and Danger.* London: Routledge.

Grammer, K. (1998) "Sex and Gender in Advertisements: Indoctrination and Exploitation",

in Eibl-Eibesfeldt, I. and Salter, F. K. (eds.) *Indoctrinability Ideology and Warfare:*

Evolutionary Perspectives, pp. 219-230*.* Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Halliburton, M. (2002) 'Rethinking Anthropological Studies of the Body: Manas and Bōdham in

Kerala', in *American Anthropologist*, 104: 4, pp. 1123-1134

Jackson, M. (1983) 'Knowledge of the Body', in *Man,* 18: 2, pp.327-345

Linden Lab, n.d. *About.* Available from: http://www.lindenlab.com/about [Accessed 9 May 2012]

Poster, M. (1998) "Virtual Ethnicity: Tribal Identity in an Age of Global Communications", in Jones,

S. (ed.) *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Community and Technology,* pp.

184-211*.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Schwartz, H. (1996) *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles.* New

York: Zone Books.

Turner, V. (1987) "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", in Carus Mahdi, L.,

Foster, S. and Little, M. (eds.) *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine*

Initiation, pp. 3-19*.* Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing.