Queered Virtuality:
The Claiming and Making of Queer Spaces and Bodies
in the User-constructed Synthetic World of Second Life

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Abstract

This study explores how queer space and queer virtual bodies (avatars) are constructed by queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning) individuals and groups in the user constructed graphical virtual world of Second Life in order to gain a better understanding of how virtual "cultural space" and identity is created and negotiated through particular spatial practices and interrelations between the user and the avatar body. Through spatial analysis, survey data and user interviews, this study determines that the geographic metaphor of simulated space and endlessly mutable virtual bodies provided by Second Life provides a great sense of pleasure and agency for users. Further, Second Life provides for new opportunities for multiplicities of gender and sexual ideation as well as new categories of queer. In addition, particular spatial practices permeate queer spaces that bind them as a fluidic cultural space connected to the larger queer lifeworld. Also, Second Life is particularly valuable for those who are engaged in questioning or transitional sexual ideation. Finally, Second Life exhibits particular aspects that could be leveraged for political action in the future. This study makes clear the importance of graphical virtual spaces for meaning making for their users and points to the potentialities these spaces have as individuals and groups increasingly use these transgeographical spaces for creation and interaction for work and play in the future.

Keywords: virtual worlds, queer, Second Life, avatars, glbt, gay
Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to the queer Residents of Second Life who have built a new queer lifeworld, as well as my family, friends and loved ones who supported me along this very real journey into the virtual.

Many thanks,

Donald Jones
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Introduction: Out in the Virtual Field

One evening in 2005, I was hanging out in the "glbt zoned" sim of Provincetown in the virtual world of Second Life when I came upon a "newbie" sitting on a couch near the entrance. I sat down and said hello. As our conversation went on, I discovered that he was an 18 year old man from the Pacific Northwest who lived with his parents and worked in a heavy labor industry. He had known he was gay for some time now, but his living and work situation prevented him from exploring his sexuality or from being "out." He asked me and others a great deal about their "RLs" (real lives, as opposed to SLs, Second Lives) in such a way that made me think he was trying to get a sense of what the life of gay people was all about. He also expressed interest in "trying some things" (that is, sexual things) in Second Life before he did so in real life. After a while, talking with me and others and watching the community happening around him, he said that he liked it here in Provincetown. What I couldn't help but notice was how Second Life was, for him, a type of community that he could not have in his physical world life and a place where he could safely explore his identity before coming out in real life.

At other times, I have met men who are straight in "real life" who play gay in-world, men who play women who date women in world, gay animal avatars, muscle boys, leather daddies, fairies in the literal sense, and all sorts of other configurations of body and style.
How do new virtual spaces such as Second Life provide new opportunities for the formation of community and identity by gay and lesbian people? How does the virtual enable new transgeographical spaces of safety and acceptance? How does the virtual allow for new configurations of identity and sexuality? What effect do virtual spaces and identities have upon the "real world" experience of users? What is the relation between virtual bodies and the bodies that people have in the physical world?

Exploring the Politics of Queer Bodies and Spaces in Second Life

“Space,” “place,” and “home” are important concepts in the formation of community and individual identity within the contemporary mobile world. Sexual minority ("queer") groups, as they have claimed a collective identity and subculture, have reclaimed and created spaces of safety, (sub)culture and resistance, particularly in urban neighborhoods (e.g. "The Village" in New York, Castro in San Francisco, Dupont/Logan Circle in Washington DC) that form part of what some may argue is an international gay and lesbian subculture (Altman 2001). In the globalized and digitized contemporary, cyberspaces for community formation have begun to form. User-constructed virtual/synthetic worlds, in which users can construct alternative/idealized/fetishized/ fantasized digital bodies and spaces, provide a new frontier for community building and meaning making for individuals and groups, particularly for those who may be excluded from the larger public sphere in their particular locality.

This study explores how queer space and queer virtual bodies (avatars) are
constructed by individuals and groups in Second Life in order to gain a better understanding of how virtual "cultural space" and identity is created and negotiated. This study will explore several questions including:

- **How do virtual spaces and bodies matter to users of Second Life?** How are the spaces they create and the bodies they inhabit aspects of Self-expression and agency?

- **How do users negotiate sexual ideation and gender within Second Life?** What possibilities do the Second Life avatar offer for reconfigurations of identity and desire?

- **What do queer spaces look like?** What spatial practices pervade and bind them together? What relation exists between queer virtual spaces and those in the physical world?

- **How is Second Life particularly valuable for those who are either separated from other queers within the physical world or are undergoing a period of transition or gender/sexual ideation questioning?**

- **What potentialities exist for the use of Second Life for political action?** How could it function to connect diasporic queers to each other within transgeographical space?

Before these questions can be answered, however, a brief description of Second Life must be given.
What is Second Life?

*Second Life*, is a three-dimensional virtual/synthetic world envisioned by its creators, Linden Lab of San Francisco California, as a space that would be built by the users themselves. “From the shape of their avatars to the design of their homes, from how they spend their time to what types of affinity groups they form; *Second Life*’s design was focused on fostering creativity and self-expression in order to create a vibrant and dynamic world full of interesting content” (Ondrejka, “A Piece” 1) It is the relative ease and power of building that greatly sets apart *Second Life* from other virtual worlds. The tools of *Second Life* have allowed a multiplicity of user-created forms based on the concept of atomistic construction, a concept that “relies on simple, easy to manipulate pieces that can be combined into large and complex creations” (Ondrejka, “Escaping” 90).

Like the MUDs (text-based virtual worlds) before it, *Second Life*’s ’narrative space’ is also defined by text, a scripting language that functions to give behaviors to avatars and graphical objects working underneath the surface: code, like DNA, for the objects and people in the world. It is this combination of atomistic construction and scripting that has fostered the creativity of the residents of *Second Life*.

*Second Life* grew out of the vision of the ‘Metaverse’ described in Neal Stephenson’s novel *Snow Crash*. “Stephenson was the first to describe an online environment [The Metaverse] that was a real place to its users, one where they interacted using the real world as a metaphor and socialized, conducted business and were
entertained” (Ondrejka, "Escaping" 81). The developers of Second Life see their user-constructed world as the first step towards fulfilling this vision. This vision is to create a space where anyone can create and build an avatar body and dreamlike places that fulfill their desires, a world that will function as ‘real,’ transcending the bounds of flesh and circumstance of the actual, tangible world.

As of June, 2006, Second Life had a population of over 7,250,000 users with over 1,700,000 having logged in within the last 60 days and an average concurrency rate of 30,000 users online at the same time in a geospatialized landscape spanning over 65,000 square acres (Linden Lab “What Is Second Life?”). In this landscape, users buy and sell (using a virtual currency that translates to U.S. dollars), socialize, build and create. While some consider Second Life a game, it is better considered a new type of platform for communication, creation and socializing. People do play games there, and some play roles, but there is no goal to Second Life other than the user’s own desires. They can form groups, fall in love, build houses, go to clubs and even make a living.

**Methodology**

This study relied on several techniques to capture the state of queer community and space within Second Life. First, a web-based survey asked questions related to demography and attitudes of participants. This survey was announced to queer coded groups within Second Life (e.g. Gay Life, Alternative Lifestyles, GLBT Network, etc.). The survey was also findable from in-world classified ads as well as within the “Places”
directory. In all, 344 completed the survey. While the actual queer population in *Second Life* cannot be determined, this survey can be considered representative of at least a portion of that population.

In addition to the survey, I interviewed 22 individuals who responded to a voluntary request to discuss the issues of space, community and self in greater detail. These interviews were 90 minutes to 3 hours in length, covering a wide range of topics. Gay men, lesbians, transgendered, and questioning individuals participated in the interviews, including several individuals who have been integral in the construction of gay space and community in *Second Life* as it exists now.

Finally, I toured the gay areas of *Second Life* looking for particular spatial practices in how they are constructed and coded as queer spaces. This analysis was first performed in Fall of 2005 and then done again in the Spring of 2007.
A Review of Relevant Literature to an Exploration of Queer Identity and Space in Second Life

Second Life launched in 2003 and only recently gained large numbers of subscribers. Because of this, there are no published studies analyzing populations there. However, this study is informed by a variety of literatures: studies of virtual worlds and virtual identity, cyberqueer studies, the study of online communities and studies in the construction of queer space in the physical world.

Describing Virtual Worlds…

Richard Bartle describes virtual worlds as “places where the imaginary meets the real,” a definition hinged on seeing the virtual as “that which isn’t, having the form or effect of that which is” (1). Virtual worlds are persistent (time and events continue there even when a user is not logged on), shared (more than one user functions and interacts with others within the world at any given time), computer-moderated (the virtual space exists on a server or across servers and is constructed via code) environments. (Bartle 1-3). Bartle’s Designing Virtual Worlds is encyclopedic in scope, but his audience is those who design virtual worlds rather than those who engage in them. As such, his text functions as a grounding and reference, but does not push the conversation forward in terms of theory.

The first text-based MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) came into existence in 1979 on a mainframe in Sussex, England (Lastowska and Hunter 18). MUDs began as games in which users “hacked and slashed” their way through virtual rooms in fantasy settings,
gaining treasure and riches by interacting through text commands with the environment (which consisted of written descriptions of the surroundings that the user was “seeing”). Later MUDs, like *TinyMUD* and *LambdaMOO* that came into existence in 1989 and 1990, respectively, focused instead on social interaction and the collective creation of virtual spaces. (Lastowka and Hunter 25; Turkle 181) Kirstie Bellman and Christopher Landauer saw this social creativity as a positive aspect of MUDs that at the time delineated them from other forms of entertainment. “…Text-based MUDs allow people the freedom of word pictures, something we can’t imitate in any graphical environment. Text-based MUDs have a much richer and more dynamic visual imagery than, say, movies or games, because it is customized by each player’s imagination… (MUDs) are also great equalizers: all people…can become builders in a very short amount of time. In fact we’ve seen examples of eight- or nine-year old children, who were raised in inner cities and were nearly illiterate, become, within a short amount of time, able to build up a whole environment” (101). This emergent complexity is what has made MUDs a site of study for researchers interested in online identity and communities (Turkle; Dibbell). However, the advent of virtual spaces that can be constructed by users in graphics as well as text brings a new level of visual richness that one must take into account. While *Second Life* has a similarity to the MUDs of the past, one must wonder if the construction of a world and bodies in a visually rich graphic environment make a difference in terms of how users relate to that environment.

Edward Castronova calls the new graphical virtual worlds by a new name – synthetic worlds (SWs) – which he defines as “expansive, world-like, large-group
environment(s) made by humans, for humans, and which (are) maintained, recorded, and rendered by a computer” which he sees as increasingly important sites of interaction between people across distances (11). Castronova makes the case that synthetic worlds are spaces that must be taken seriously, even if they are often used for play. He points out that users of SWs often spend a large amount of time within them, an average of 29 hours a week in one study of Everquest (Castronova 61). As such, SWs are spaces where more and more people spend a significant amount of time for play, socializing and business. This underscores the need to explore the implications of these spaces for groups of people and society at-large. As an economist, Castronova focuses on questions of commerce, government, and policy, rather than the socio-psychological aspects of this study. However, he does argue that “the designed social institutions of synthetic worlds do indeed have an affect on life outside, if only because it is not impossible not to compare their emotional effects to those produced by their equivalents on Earth” (Castronova 121). For example, users create friendships, love affairs, collegial groupings and long-distant but ongoing contacts that have emotional value. Because online interactions have a strong affective component, they have implications for life in the physical world.

Because SWs function on a geospatial metaphor (i.e. avatars move and interact within an expansive three-dimensionally rendered environment) the relation of propinquity (that is, proximity) to social interaction in synthetic space is also of interest. Miller McPherson et al. argue in their discussion of homophily (similarity) that geographic propinquity is a basic factor in the number and type of contacts people develop. Kay W. Axhausen discusses in more detail how physical space impacts social
relations by relating geography and social ties to travel and communication costs. While these studies relate to actual physical space, it can be argued that online spaces, particularly those as visually rich as three-dimensional virtual worlds, provide a significant sense of locality for participants. Nicholas Ducheneaut et al. in two separate papers discuss the “cantina” in Star Wars Galaxies (SWG), a virtual world, as social space, problematizing how the three-dimensional environment impacts social interaction (Ducheneaut & Moore; Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell). They find that while such spaces are important, they do not necessarily function well as places of interaction as they are constructed currently in SWG. However, the cantina in SWG functions very differently than the social spaces of a world such as Second Life because SWG is a game world with specific goals that players are there to achieve (combat, leveling, acquiring objects). Second Life has no goal other than interaction and creation, so its social spaces will inherently function differently than those in game worlds because spaces are produced for the specific intention of being social spaces. As such, this study will in part explore whether queer-coded spaces in Second Life matter for the construction of queer identity and community there.
...And the Bodies That Inhabit Them

If we consider the physical map of the body and our experience of inhabiting it as socially mediated, then it should not be difficult to imagine the next step in a progression toward the social – that is, to imagine the *location* of the self that inhabits the body as also socially mediated – not in the usual ways we think of subject constructed in terms of position within a social field or of capacity to experience, but of the *physical* location of the subject, *independent* of the body within which theories of the body are accustomed to ground it, within a system of symbolic exchange, that is, information technology.

(Stone 92)

When discussing virtual bodies, scholars are primarily concerned with “avatars.”

The term avatar is derived from the Sanskrit *avatara* and is meant to suggest “the idea of a kind of transubstantiation, the incarnation of life in a different form” (Tofts 56). Avatars are representations, either textual or visual, of people’s presence in a digital environment. The avatar represents a virtual embodiment of a subject position within synchronous communication space.

There has been much work done on the philosophy of the virtual body (Haraway; Stone; Hayles; Graham; Ihde, et al.), and a full survey of the issues related is beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to highlight in such literature the idea that contemporary technologies (and information technologies in particular) have changed our conception of the boundaries and relations of subject’s bodies to themselves and each other, which stands in opposition to Cartesian concepts of a unitive Self existing within (and separable from) the organic body. Donna Haraway argues that “we are all chimeras theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism, in short, we are cyborgs” (150). Elaine Graham states that now in the age of the “post/ [Cartesian] human” the
“subject is always an organic-technological body-in-relation, both creative agent and created subject within a changing environment” (198). N. Katherine Hayles sees virtual technologies, as well as other “posthuman” technologies, as challenging the boundaries that the Cartesian duality creates not just between the mind and the body but the person and the environment. “Only if one thinks of the subject as an autonomous self independent of the environment is one likely to experience panic … [about losing the body]” (Hayles 290). Rather, “it is not a question of leaving the body behind but rather of extending embodied awareness in highly specific, local, and material ways that would be impossible without electronic prosthesis” (Hayles 291). Pierre Lévy describes this process similarly: “the virtualization of the body is...not a form of disembodiment but a re-recreation, a reincarnation, a multiplication, vectorization and heterogenesis of the human” (44). Rather than losing the body, it is rearticulated within virtual space as the boundaries of body-self are extended through the mediation of technology.

One particular aspect of the virtual body is its plurality. “Users do not simply have one body and one identity while online, but at times inhabit a space in which they perform several, and often in complicated configurations. In fact, the moment you enter a virtual environment you immediately have at least two bodies: a corporeal one and a digital one” (T. Taylor 439). And, the digital body can express particular aspects of self in multiple ways (though John Suler rightly points out that we also express self in multiple ways – child, parent, student, employee, neighbor, friend – within our corporeal bodies as well, so in some ways this is not novel). But, in virtuality, Lévy warns, “the boundary between heterogenesis and alienation, actualization and commodity reification,
virtualization and amputation, is never clearly defined” (44).

Allucquere Rosanne Stone also posits that the virtual body is a projection of self within a “network of information exchange through which the self moves by a different order of vectors from those by which the body moves, a self which moves in a spatiality from which the [organic] body is excluded” (92). The self projected onto the Internet is an expression within a *space*. While Stone makes a distinction between body/self, Haraway and others might also argue that that expression of self within the space functions as a discursive body, a body which expresses agency within the space, where the flesh body and the body of pixels and/or text are one acting within the representation of space that the communication environment provides (Tofts 55-56). I will return to these questions of the virtual body within the context of the study at hand.

**Queers in (Cyber)space**

In her essay “Cyberqueer,” Nina Wakeford describes several assumptions behind the idea of the queer person in cyberspace. First, it assumes that queer identity is constructed by culture and language, but “for the most part those producing and consuming cyberqueer spaces are obliged to work within what is technically possible within computer systems, and the representations which they have the skills to construct in each forum” (Wakeford “Cyberqueer” 412). In other words, there is a tension between the interface and the capacity for queer identity online. Further, many theorists see cyberspace as the ultimate site for fluidity of identity, the ultimate “trans” space. “The ideology of fluid identities is evident in the maxim ‘you can be whoever you want to be’
in cyberspace, and this can change with varying presentations of self” that may be a “too convincing” fit to the utopic dreams of the dissolution of the bonds of gender and sexuality categories found in much of queer theory (Wakeford “Cyberqueer” 412). She is also concerned that there is a focus on how bodies are constructed within cyberspace without enough attention to the bodies that are on the other side of the screen (that is, in physical space). For example, what is the relationship of physical wants and desires produced online and experienced off-line? Finally, she believes that there is a lack of discussion of what constraints rest on the “ability [of users] to perform identities...in a cyberqueer space” (Wakeford “Cyberqueer” 413). Wakeford’s concerns are intended to push the study of the queer online forward as an area of critical research.

With these concerns in mind, it is still important to realize how cyberspace has provided opportunities for the exploration and invention of queer identity and community enabled by the ability to find others who share, or wish to construct, a queer subject position. Bettina Heinz, et al. argue that the Internet has allowed gay people from all over the world to find community that can often not be found in their particular offline location due to local social circumstances (e.g. sparsity of other gay people, homophobia and even outright persecution). “Isolated previously not only from GLBT members of other national cultures by the restraints of geographical and political borders, but also from other members of their own national cultures due to the varying levels of homophobia and persecution present within legislative and executive bodies, cyberspace promises, at least in theory, an emancipatory and community-building realm that transcends international boundaries and international borders” (Heinz 108). Katelyn
McKenna and John Bargh found that participants in Internet newsgroups that were coded as gay were more likely to have a stronger sense of identity that encouraged them to express their “queerness” in other parts of their life (offline). Larry Gross also found in a survey of GLBT youth that “two-thirds of respondents said that being online helped them accept their sexual orientation; and 35 percent, that being online was crucial to this acceptance” (265). As such, the Internet has provided a rich opportunity for people with struggling with their own self-identity as gay/queer to find others like them and find greater acceptance of themselves through their interaction in cyberspace. The projects are important in grounding the likelihood of gay community online as it has been articulated prior to the advent of synthetic worlds. It is a question of this study whether synthetic worlds provide richer opportunities for community and identity construction than textual forums and web sites.

Another question is what type of queer is promulgated in the online space. Jonathan Alexander points to the multiplicity of expressions of “gayness” on the World Wide Web on home pages and that this expression is motivated by a desire to find community. But, he found a preponderance of certain types of symbols and constructions of “gay” online. “Fairly static boundaries between straight/gay...are often reinforced through these pages...bisexuality sometimes garners a mention, but is seldom explored...(and) other alternative kinds of sexual practices are fetishized and fixed into their own category” (Alexander 98). To him, this begs the question: “what do we gain and what do we lose in online communities? Who is and who is not represented, and why?” (Alexander 104). Sally Munt, et al., in their analysis of a lesbian website describes virtual communities as
“backstage spaces” where identity is shaped (often maintaining pre-existing identity hierarchies) as well as providing a utopic space in which “discursive” community happens (136). “Identity hierarchies remain reified, however, as the site functions to invoke pre-existing assumptions of an authentic, evolved lesbian signifier” (Munt, et al. 136). Mary Bryson, in her ethnographic study of lesbians online also found that while GLBT spaces online allowed for experimentation with identity and sexuality “in certain respects,” it also provided an entry into a “cultural context within which to learn how to be queer through immersion and participation in a sexually-specific subculture” (Bryson 249). In other words, many studies find that a particular type of queerness (particularly informed by Western constructions of gay identity) is deployed in online spaces so that such sites are not as liberatory as cyberqueer theorists desire in their utopic musings.

Kate O’Riordan argues that limitations to queer identity online can be blamed in part on commodification. “In terms of numbers and commercial viability, the portals of PlanetOut, Gaydar and Diva’s Blue Room with their select and click identity menus, are the contemporary sites of online queer identity formation” (though she acknowledges other non-commercial spaces where other more transgressive identities could be constructed) (O’Riordan 31). *Particular* constructions of identity, of “how to be queer,” of what is desired and what is desirable, and what is normative (among queer people) are repeated within cyberspace and affects how the queer virtual body is constructed. This is not to say that there are not those who use cyberspace as spaces for transgressive identity exploration, but that the ways that they explore, the means by which they describe and define, the types they take on, are already bounded by discursive constructions of identity
that pre-exist within actual space. In that sense, particular constructions of queer identity are diffused through cyberspace that in turn define and bind queer cyber-bodies in particular ways. While cyberspace is an abstract space, it is also a space where particular representations and conceptions are promulgated through images, videos, and texts (both static and dynamic, i.e. dialogue with other Internet users). These questions of bounded bodies and spaces will pervade this study.

**Queered Textual Virtual Worlds**

Before there were graphical virtual worlds, constructions of the queer virtual body were expressed within text-based communication environments. The earliest synchronous communication environments were bulletin board systems, text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and their ilk and Internet Relay Chat (IRC). In these spaces the body was literally expressed as a text, constructed from particular linguistic constructions that were founded in pre-existing constructions of gay identity. Wakeford discusses the history of queer online spaces in the pre-graphical paradigm (“New Technologies”). Studies by Woodland, Shaw, and Campbell are of particular relevance since they explored queer identity within online synchronous communication environments.

In his study “Queer Spaces, Modem Boys and Pagan Statues,” Randal Woodland looked at queer spaces within ModemBoy, a gay-male oriented bulletin board system, America Online (AOL), the ISCA student bulletin board at the University of Iowa and LambdaMOO, an early user-constructed text-based world.

ModemBoy functioned as a specifically gay male space based on the metaphor of a
high school. “Though the desired effect of ModemBoy’s central conceit is to encourage a
tone of playful camaraderie among users, the implications of this elaborate textual
game...constructs gay men as horny, sexually compulsive adolescent boys...ModemBoy
builds on images common in gay male subculture and in society as a whole. Through its
playful focus on a particular strand of gay iconography, ModemBoy gains the
comfortable uniformity of a consistent spatial metaphor but potentially disenfranchises
more diverse expressions of queer identity” (Woodland 419-420). Conversely, AOL chat
rooms tended to use the ambiguous moniker M4M to denote a place where men could
look for(4) men. “On a busy evening, hundreds of these rooms may be listed, with a
substantial number named in such a way as to invoke what we might term a sexually
compatible discourse community” (Woodland 420). On ISCA, the main chat space was
called Stonewall Cafe, harkening to a common landmark in gay rights history.
LambdaMOO, as a world that was constructed by its users with relatively rich tools for
constructing textual experience, held a queer space known as Weaveworld, which was
hidden off the beaten path and functioned upon a classical Greek metaphor. “Evidence of
the ethos of this neighborhood might come as a user poked into the cottages and
treehouses [in the space] and found them inhabited overwhelmingly by male characters –
with a preponderance of strapping young men with artistic sensibilities” (Woodland 422).
Later, more specifically encoded spaces such as a GLBT community center and a gay sex
club appeared within LambdaMOO.

In Woodland’s analysis, virtual space helped construct identity. ModemBoys and
LambdaMOO in particular provided specific culturally encoded spaces that molded how
users expressed their identity within the space. “ModemBoy’s atmosphere of narcissism, sex-crazed boys exaggerates one cultural image of gay men and uses that as a signifier to give a sense of community. By contrast, and in a much more sophisticated way, the gay ghetto of Weaveworld uses markers of paganism, anarchy and sensuality to delineate a ‘queer’ space off the beaten path” (Woodland 428). In these spaces, “words mediate and recreate the identities of the tribe” (Woodland 430). And, these spaces were constructed around particular cultural markers that function in that mediation and recreation.

Two other studies have looked specifically at constructions of gay male identity within IRC. IRC is a text-based synchronous chat space organized into channels based on particular interests. Shaw analyzed how gay men constructed themselves within the IRC channel #gaysex. Unlike MUDs, where there is a persistent textual strata within which users interacted, IRC was and is simply a multi-user text based chat channel denoted by a short channel name (and sometimes a descriptive phrase). David Shaw argues that because of the limitations of the space, the queer virtual body was not only constructed by the user but by the desires of the other that due to narrow bandwidth of text had to construct an idealized sense of the body of the other. “The texts users produce are...discourses of absence. They are replete with homosexual desire and homosexual need. The desire is manifest in the fantasies projected onto other #gaysex-ers as well as the desire to meet other gay men and fight the constraints of the medium” (Shaw 144). This study will explore how homosexual desire and need are used to construct idealized graphical bodies that rather than being absent (though still ringing hollow?) insert themselves into the equation of desire within Second Life.
John Campbell, in his ethnographic exploration of the IRC channels #gaymuscle [bodybuilder], #gaymusclebear [large, hairy, muscular men] and #gaychub [fat men and the men who love them], reiterates how bodies are constructed textually in these narrow bandwidth mediums. He found within these IRC channels rich subcultures around particular constructions of actual bodies. Since they were based in text, “(s)tats became incorporated into an individual’s online identity in much the way a face and a particular build becomes representative of a person in physical-world interactions” (Campbell 123). Unlike some spaces, he found that within these particular channels that desirability was related to authenticity. “The body performed online through stats and various qualitative descriptors is desirable only as long as it is understood as corresponding to an actual physical body” (Campbell 124). Campbell argues, that “the body and all the sociocultural ways the body is apprehended – the gendered body, the raced body, the classed body, the sexualized body, the ethnic body, the aged body – do not simply cease to hold valence when one enters cyberspace...[and] I have found that the identities individuals construct online generally reflect those offline characteristics foremost in their understandings of themselves” (Campbell 190). Campbell’s study is not only a prime example of ethnographic research among an online queer community but a strong argument for remembering the enfleshed reality behind and articulated through the avatar. The tension between graphical avatar and lived body will play a role in the analysis to come.
Exploring Online Community and Identity: Methodological Precursors

Since this study focuses on a particular group’s construction of identity and community online, it is also important to look at how groups online have been studied before. Again, the major projects that have come before took place within the textual worlds of MUDs and MOOs as well as more static community sites (websites, newsgroups, forums, etc.). Sherry Turkle explored identity construction within MUDs from a psychoanalytic point of view. To her they “imply difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity and fragmentation” (Turkle 185). Within MUDs, people can create multiple identities in which they explored different aspects of themselves. Turkle discusses how virtual spaces can be opportunities to explore aspects of self in relatively safe space, though warns too of its dangers. “Without any principle of coherence, the self spins off in all directions. Multiplicity is not viable if it means a shifting among personalities that cannot communicate. Multiplicity is not acceptable if it means being confused to the point of immobility” (Turkle 258). Turkle’s methodology primarily involved field research at locations and among groups where people used computers along with interviews of MUD users and others. However, she “chose not to report on [her] own findings unless [she had] met the Internet user in person rather than simply in persona” (Turkle 324). Since Turkle was engaging from a psychoanalytic perspective and working at a time when Internet use was not as widespread, this was wholly appropriate. However, a face-to-face method for this particular study is unfeasible, as Second Life
users are globally dispersed. Turkle’s findings will inform the discussion in terms of the tensions between real and virtual selves in all their multiplicities.

Others, however, have found value at exploring online communities within their own context. Christine Hine argues that the Internet provides a new venue for the use of ethnographic research. Starting from a particular media event, the 1997 Louise Woodward trial, she explored the websites and online discussions that grew up around this event. She concludes that “shedding a reliance on holism, face-to-face interaction and dwelling in a bounded location opens up new horizons for ethnography and promises new ways of understanding the Internet” (Hine 155). While Hine was not studying an online synchronous communication space or virtual world, her study pushes forward the application of field methods to online research. Markham similarly plunged herself into online interactions within chat and MUD spaces, engaging in a more face-to-face ethnography mediated by the textual chat space. According to Markham, “to go to the Internet simply to access information is to envision it as a tool, not a place; but to go to be with others implies a place to be, and this necessarily implicates a sense of embodiment” (212). This continuum of tool, place and way of being is a helpful framework for how users of Second Life see their interaction within that particular synthetic world.

Online virtual spaces have also been sites of studies of race and gender (Basset; Ebo). Lori Kendall explored constructions of masculinity within the MUD BlueSky
finding that “participants…conform to dominant masculinity standards. They related to each other in ways that support heterosexual masculinity…and in the process continue to objectify women” (Kendall 107). Again, Kendall used an immersive ethnographic approach to her study. It is also important to note that Kendall found that relationships and identities online reflected, rather than transcended cultural norms, which may also be true in the means by which queer identity is constructed in Second Life. Again, this study was done in a text based world, and as such dynamics might be somewhat different due to the differences between mediation by text and image/text found between textual and graphical virtual worlds. But, these studies function as precursors for the type of research this project presents.

**Queer Space in the Actual World**

A review of relevant literature would not be complete without some discussion of writings upon the construction of queer space in the physical world. After all, virtual spaces have a tendency to function as Baudrillardian simulacra to their analogues in the physical world (e.g. a gay area in Second Life might be called “Provincetown” or “Fire Island”). Further, because they function on a geographical metaphor, they take on aspects of gay space on their own.

The production of queer space has become an area of inquiry within the field of cultural geography (Bell and Valentine; Ingraham, et al.; Binnie and Valentine; Hubbard). Gill Valentine cites Doreen Massey’s definition of space:
[space] is the product of intricacies and the complexities, the interlockings and non-interlockings, of relations from the unimaginably cosmic to the intimately tiny. And precisely because it is the product of relations, relations which are active practices, material and embedded, practices which have to be carried out, space is always in a process of becoming. It is always being made.  

(Massey 283)

Valentine goes on to discuss studies that “challenge…the invisibility of lesbians and gay men by mapping out the most obvious material spaces that sexual dissidents have created in both urban and rural landscapes. However, they have also been critiqued because in doing so they have implicitly set up lesbian and gay space as an ‘exotic’ other, leaving everyday spaces outside these ghettos and lesbian lands unquestioned as heterosexual” (Valentine 149). Valentine also discusses queer space as performative space (harkening to Butler’s notion of performance/performativity) in which heteronormativity is questioned. “These understandings of sexual spaces, which regard them as being brought into being through specific performances, while themselves also being performative of particular power relations (and therefore forever relational, provisional and shifting) mean that we need to employ more intricate cartographic skills if we are to map them” (Valentine 155). Since Second Life’s space is inherently performative as a constructed virtual space (where the user makes choices of body and gesture) the ways in which sexuality is performed within these spaces will be a question for exploration. Lawrence Knopp argues further that “…place, placelessness and movement [in queer quests for identity are] fluid and ‘under construction’ sets of spatial practices; these practices, meanwhile are construed as generated in and through networks and relationships, and as involving all manner of human and non-human
‘actants.’ Importantly, they dispense pleasure, security and empowerment along with (always partial) knowledge and understanding” (“Ontologies” 131). Because virtual space is always in flux, a spatial and fluid understanding of place is helpful as a grounding principle.

There has also been some interest in the construction of queer space from an architectural perspective (Sanders; Betsky). Aaron Betsky describes a queer space as

…a kind of space that I find liberating, that I think might help us avoid some of the imprisoning characteristics of the modern city. It is a useless, amoral, and sensual space that lives only in and for experience. It is a space of spectacle, consumption, dance, and obscenity. It is a misuse or deformation of a place, an appropriation of the buildings and codes of the city for perverse purposes. It is a space in between the body and technology, a space of pure artifice. (Betsky 5)

While this description is somewhat idealized (a different observer might find a less than rosy description of queered spaces), this description can certainly be applied to queer virtual spaces. After all, virtual spaces are primarily spaces for pleasurable interaction and consumption and are created out of nothing to represent something, appropriating real-world imagery and virtual world objects for a variety of sensual uses.

One critique of queer urban spaces is the dominance of white, male, middle-to-upper class white men. Knopp argues in his analysis of queer spaces in cities that “dominant gay male cultural identities are profoundly structured by interlinked discourses and deeply entrenches, strongly interconnected (yet contingently articulated) practices of class, race, gender and sexual relations” which seem to still maintain white, male (and even heterosexual) privilege (“Sexuality and Urban Space” 173). It has been mentioned earlier how studies have found that queer space online has a tendency to
reflect rather than disrupt pre-existing understandings of queer identity. Knopp’s study argues that the issues of male privilege must also be taken into account in how queer virtual spaces are articulated.

Several historical and anthropological studies have also noted the importance of queer spaces to queer identity (Kennedy and Davis; Howard; Sears). Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner also argue that “the space of sexual culture has become obnoxiously cramped from doing the work of maintaining a normal metaculture” (325). But, sexual subculture is a necessary component of the queer experience. After all, queer space is constructed by the nature of queer identity, the locus of desire. Mark Turner discusses the streets and parks of New York and London as sites for cruising. While his study is historically based in the physical spaces of two cities, Turner acknowledges the new landscapes that have been opened on the Internet. “On the internet [sic], there is no centre, and consequently no periphery – there are clusters of space – an amorphous constellation of connections that we tend to map using routine geographies but which can only ever be tentative and certainly not static because they are frequently shifting” (Turner 176). However, how does the geographical metaphor in Second Life return us to a firmer sense of place since, in Second Life, there may be virtual streets and parks (or bath houses) where men meet other men?

Queer social spaces in Second Life are primarily places of play and pleasure. It is unsurprising to see dance floors and clubs across the landscape that are sites for queer gathering. Studies have discussed the use of leisure spaces by queer populations (Skeggs; Pritchard et al.) finding that they were important for the spatialization of
identity construction. Fiona Buckland studied gay dance clubs in New York as a site for queer world-making. “Queer lifeworlds embod[y] utopic imagination and power whereby queerness occupie[s] the center, in which the heterosexual couple was no longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture” (Buckland 6). The club has an inherently political and community identity building power that transcends the function of play and pleasure in the dance. As a primary site for queer congregation (especially for gay men), the club becomes a significant referent for the construction of virtual spaces within Second Life. How is the performance of queer identity in clubs in actual space and virtual space similar? What politics come from the act of dancing within a virtual space?

Finally, several authors cite Marcel Lefebvre’s “three part dialectic” of space: spatial practice (how everyday life is practiced within a space), representations of space (how expert discourses frame understanding of a space), and spaces of representation (how a space might be, fully lived and experienced, moved forward in its potential) (Shields 161). Vincent Miller discusses how gay space is produced in Vancouver, Canada in part by alternative discourses in the queer press that counter representations of space that are put forth by hegemonic heteronormative power. Dianne Chisolm notes that Lefebvre calls for “a revolutionary project that has yet to make space for sex and sexuality. In retrospect, he seems to have been answered by the sexual revolution that appropriated space for the gay mecas of Manhattan’s Village and San Francisco’s Castro” (Chisolm 29). However, queer people exist in places more dispersed than urban centers. Do virtual spaces provide new opportunities for the construction of places of
pleasure? Tom Boellstorff in his study of gay and lesbian men and women in Indonesia looks at space also as a site of desire. “I am interested in how being gay and lesbi[sic] is shaped by spatial dimensions of domination, by the relationship between space and desire: desire operates across space, and space ‘unleashes desire’” (Boellstorff 127, quoting Lefebvre in part). It is within specific sites, such as cruising spots, malls, discos, homes, and events and organizations that identity is formed. “Subjectivity shapes place. And place shapes subjectivity, as exemplified in how gay men (and lesbi women) often employ deictics, referring to themselves as “people like this”…,”members of here”…,”people like that”…, or “people like here”…Some gay men feel they become gay only in certain places…” (Boellstorff 150-151). How might virtual spaces function as a place where someone who is unable to express their identity in the actual world everyday life can be “gay” in an alternate environment? How may this affect their offline identity?

**Toward a Critical Virtual Ethnography of Queer Spaces**

This review points forward towards the study in question probably more so than backwards towards the literature. This is a factor of the application of diverse disciplinary positions to a new medium of study, as it seems to me the most critical questions are how to apply earlier works on similar but not identical environments upon a new arena of inquiry. Earlier discussions of virtuality/cyberqueer theory have often been utopic in character, seeking a validation of theoretical positions in the technotranscendence of the brave new world of the Internet; early studies of online
communities have been more concerned with giving the study of them an academic credibility; studies of queer spaces in real life are valuable but may not hold as an analytical tool due to the difference in the medium (since virtual spaces may be experienced geographically, but they are not lived in in the same way that the physical world is lived in). However, the literature as a whole validates the use of ethnographic and survey research for describing the contours of these spaces and communities and points some avenues by which responses and places might be analyzed.
The Politics of Space: Queers in Second Life

It is a weekday evening at the Gay Holocaust Memorial, a striking monumental space where two walls flank a burning torchier over which hovers a pink triangle. Flowers are strewn and candles flicker on the steps in front, and a picture of Andrew Anthos, a 72 year old man who will soon be dead of injuries from an alleged hate crime, is displayed on a placard. Nearby, sitting in a circle, a group of men and women from all across the country (and the world) hold vigil for him. I stop to speak to the participants briefly before continuing my walk through the streets of Provincetown West, the heart of the Pride Continent in Dreamland.

This vignette describes a particularly poignant experience and space within Second Life, one that is not necessarily typical, but speaks to the potentialities of Second Life for types of meaning making.

Theorizing on Queer Virtual Space in Second Life

Second Life provides space for two types of activity: interaction and creation. One interacts with others from all over the world while engaging in acts of construction of space and identity. For queer participants in Second Life, the construction of queer space and interaction within it are important activities that pervade their experience of the environment. Queer space contextualizes interaction for these users. By their coding, queer spaces mark out bounded space in which queer constructions of culture and sexuality are normative. By their harkening to actual world spaces, queer virtual spaces mark out a variety of types of space for queer meaning making. The dance club provides a center in which one engages with others in an experience of commonality wrapped in a shared visual and aural experience of light and music. The sex club provides for a boundless array of sexual variety that opens new opportunities for sexual expression and
experimentation. Non-sexual social spaces provide places where users can engage with each other in the sharing of life experience and play. And, there are boundless opportunities for new types of spaces for education about queer culture for those who are still coming to terms with their sexuality as well as non-queer people who are looking for a better understanding of this particular group of people.

Second Life further functions as a queer utopic space. What spaces can come into existence when anyone can build what they wish without being bounded by the restrictions placed by the limits of geography and heteronormative history? In many ways the queer spaces of Second Life represent lucid dreams set into permanence in pixel and form. The diversity of such spaces speaks to the many, and often conflicting, dreams of the millions of users that participate.

But, it is important to note, that these dreams are still bounded by constructions that exist in the real world. As will be discussed, queer spaces are highly sexual and highly commercial. For many users, Second Life is a place for play and fantasy, so desire for sexual fun and dreams of conspicuous consumption unsurprisingly leap from the imaginations of people who live in a highly commercialized and often times sexually repressed world. Second Life serves as a space for wish fulfillment for many, a place where one can have the body they always wanted, the house they always wished they could afford, the social life that real-world circumstance prevents, the sexual and identity freedom that social forces tightly bound.

Queer neighborhoods in Second Life in no way replace the communities of meaning that queer people construct for themselves in the cities and towns of the world.
However, they do offer a new site for queer worldmaking in which identity is expressed through space as well as avatar. These sites are globally accessible at any time of the day, and as such collapse space and time in new ways. These spaces are important because they enable interaction between queers and give them a sense of identity and safety against discrimination and alienation. This chapter will discuss the historical development of queer spaces within *Second Life* and the development of particular spatial practices within these spaces.

A few biases/caveats regarding the analysis of this chapter are in order. While queer as a particular subject position encompasses gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, questioning and other non-majority sexual ideations, most spaces I analyzed cater to a gay male population. The reason for this is that most queer spaces in *Second Life* are constructed for gay men, and most of the lesbian coded spaces are for women only (in other words, I would not have been allowed in them without an act of deception posing as a women). I will, however, discuss the lesbian and transgender experience within *Second Life* in the chapter on identity articulation and construction. Further, I do not explicitly address spaces from the “furry” subpopulation here, though they definitely embody the characteristics found in other queer spaces. I will discuss the furries to some extent in the chapter on identity, though the subculture they have constructed in *Second Life* is worth a project of its own.
Understanding Space in *Second Life*

*Second Life* functions on a three-dimensional geospatial metaphor and as such can be considered a synthetic world. Digital bodies representing users (avatars) move through a simulated terrain of plains, hills, mountains, lakes, as well as urban spaces. Residents build structures there with built-in tools for what is termed “atomistic construction” (Ondrejka, “Escaping” 90). This geography is expansive; “what began as 64 acres\(^1\) in 2003 is now over 65,000 acres and growing rapidly” (Linden Lab “What Is Second Life?”). Residents can explore cities, gardens, jungles, mountains, towns and many structures that could not exist in physical space (e.g. spinning shapes in the sky or buildings that defy physics). Residents, sometimes in groups, construct these spaces for a variety of purposes (residential, commercial, cultural, entertainment, work).

However, there are significant ways that *Second Life* does not function in the same way as the “real world” in terms of its spatial metaphorization. First, avatars can fly, experiencing their simulated world quite differently than landbound physical bodies. Secondly, avatars can teleport between any two points instantaneously, thereby collapsing space and time making the actual proximity of places matter less. Finally, spaces and places there, even entire islands, can appear and disappear quite quickly. This ephemerality provides a more fluid and dynamic state of being where Residents articulate culture differently than in the physical world (where locality and proximity sediment peoples, history and cultural objects more firmly in space).

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\(^1\) Land in *Second Life* is measured in standard units of area in relation to the avatar body. Theoretically, the time it would take to walk a mile in *Second Life* would be the same as to walk a mile in the physical world.
That space functions differently in Second Life does not mean spaces and places lack importance. After all, the fluid and dynamic user-constructed graphic layer sets Second Life apart from other types of online communication environments. Users build the world in many text-based MUDs and MOOs, but lack graphics. Other synthetic worlds may be graphically rich, but are designed by a game company or restrict the ability of users to build on their own. In Second Life, Residents create the spaces in which they interact. These spatial metaphorizations have implications for queer Residents.

**An Early Coming Out**

Because of the importance of the geospatial metaphor to the experience of Second Life, populations like queers and others make their presence known by laying claim to and creating simulated spaces marked by their ideational position (e.g. gay clubs or ethnically themed areas). Early in Second Life history queers participated in Second Life, though many remained closeted. The opening of a queer club, though, broke open the closet doors for some of these Residents. *New World Notes*’ Wagner James Au reports on the opening of the first gay club in Second Life, “The Open Flame,” in June of 2003, during the beta period (Au “Open Flame”). “‘There has been a controversy brewing in the threads,’ my in-the-closet…source told me. After Thai Greenacre came out on the SL messaging board as a lesbian, then announced the Flame's ribbon cutting, it led to a few more self-outings. ‘A couple of people [other Second Life players] have come out over it, including a transsexual,’ as my source put it” (Au “Open Flame”). However, others reacted quite differently. “‘I reported some really bad posts in the forums,’ my source IMs me, ‘responses to Thai’i’s club... really bad links and degrading pictures and slogans.
So although they didn't type the words, they were there [in the links]” (Au “Open Flame”). Despite this controversy, “The Open Flame” attracted a large number of Residents at opening and functioned as a social space for queers for some time thereafter. As such, the act of opening the club was a “coming out” moment, where both Thai Greenacre and others inspired by his/her – while Thai Greenacre is a lesbian in the physical world, her avatar is a gay male – declaration of identity made their presence known in the larger community.

“A Gay Themed Sim?”

The following month, the Second Life forums show evidence of resistance by some Residents to a visible queer presence in Second Life. On July 14, 2003, Baltus Brightwillow posted “Gay Themed Sim! I would really like a gay themed sim. No, it wouldn't be a ghetto. Just an idea... :)” (Second Life Forums). This began an extended conversation among Second Life Residents that continued sporadically until October of 2004. Forum writers responded quite negatively at first, and heated discussion followed for some time. Eventually, forum participants reached a consensus that a gay sim would provide a “safe” space in which events, education, and socializing could occur.

There were three counter-arguments to the construction of a gay sim that pervaded the thread: (1) that queer ideational positioning is only sexual, not cultural; (2) a failure to understand the pervasiveness of heterosexuality in majority culture; and (3) the tension between separation of a group versus assimilation with the larger community.

2 This behavior, it should be noted, was in violation of the Terms of Service (the code of conduct within Second Life), so Linden Lab removed the offending posts.
“Gay is just about sex”

Some forum writers’ understanding of how the category “gay” is constructed culturally fails to take into account that there is a difference between homosexuality as a type of sexual activity and gay as a political and cultural positioning. Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality: Introduction*, discusses how the “homosexual” was created in the nineteenth century discourses of medicine and psychiatry as the deviant and abnormal category by which heterosexuality was normalized. *Gay* emerged in the late twentieth century as a particular cultural and political movement that functions as a reverse discourse to the stigmatized homosexual. As such, gay culture is an “owned” culture in that gay people generally emerge out of heterosexual families and histories and take on particular practices, language, cultural references and relationship structures when they come out and identify with the gay community. The “just sex” argument fails to take into account the reality of gay moments, histories, experiences, and places in the past and the present.

However, is there a need for “gay culture” as (and if) fluid sexualities become normalized? From what some younger people write in the forum, the categories (while still strong) mean less for some, having lost a degree of its political importance in a more accepting time. Even more so, the apparent fluidity of sexual identity within cybertulture further places these cultural trappings in question.
“Why not a heterosexual sim?”

Forum writers persistently argued that if one established a gay sim, then why not a heterosexual sim. Those arguing this failed to recognize the pervasiveness of heterosexuality in majority culture. While there is a nominal impression of diversity within *Second Life*, heterosexual gathering places and commodities pervade the space. This “heteronormativity” is part of what inspires gay people to find their “tribe” in particular geographical spaces as a zone of safety and community. Cindy J. Cohen defines heteronormativity as the practices and institutions “that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as fundamental and ‘natural’ within society” (24). Throughout *Second Life*, Residents experience an overwhelming array of normalized images of heterosexual sex and love in advertisements and social spaces. This counter-argument is rather a veiled homophobic disapproval of the “gay lifestyle.” They did not care what gay people did, as long as they did not flaunt it, as if heterosexuality does not pervade cultural practices and social institutions.

Assimilation vs. Separation

Some writers, both gay and straight, see dangers in setting apart the gay/queer community from the larger community of *Second Life*. A perpetual tension exists between these two poles queer life on and off-line. Queer populations, particularly in urban centers, have the opportunity for self-segregation (as seen in the gay ghettos of New York, San Francisco, and Washington) as well as opportunities for integration into the larger community. But self-segregation can become “ghettoization” and integration
portends potential invisibility. Nevertheless, gay forum writers express a desire for gay spaces as zones of safety and commonality even in the midst of the welcoming (or at least tolerant) *Second Life* community, especially for those who were new to *Second Life* or newly out or questioning. Visible and congregated gay communities within Second Life may thus provide a “home” for those who are just coming out or lack a gay community in the physical world.

**Postcards from Queer Second Life, 2005**

While these discussions continued, gay themed spaces appeared (and disappeared) in *Second Life*. In the Fall of 2005, I inventoried some of these self-described “gay” spaces. This exploration focused on gay male spaces, which were (and are) much more prolific than lesbian or transgendered spaces.

From this analysis, particular spatial practices emerge that extend to contemporary queer spaces as well. First, queer spaces at this time rely on particular queer codings such as rainbow flags, homoerotic art or physical world place names to define those spaces as queer space, i.e. mimicked social symbols of the real. Secondly, many of these spaces attempt to replicate real world spatial analogs, in particular dance clubs or bathhouses, which are historically typical spaces for homosocial/sexual engagement. Third, many of these spaces are highly sexualized (though generally blending homosocial/sexual activities), which is not surprising since sex is integral to the construction of queer identity (and a very common past time in *Second Life*). Fourth, many of these spaces were highly commoditized, which again is unsurprising in a
synthetic world with a functioning and active economy. Finally, most do not exist anymore. This speaks to the fluidity and dynamism of Second Life. These spatial practices pervade the construction of the sites surveyed.

Rainbow Island

Rainbow Island (Figure 1) caters to a gay audience as a wedding location. In Second Life, one can "marry" whomever they wish (though it is a monogamous commitment). Outside of this view, is an ice castle that sits in the middle of the island, decorated with rainbow ornamentation (harkening to the rainbow flag of the global gay movement) and images of scantily clad men (implying a gay male positioning). Rainbow Island functions as a fantastical/utopic space in which those who cannot legally marry in the physical world can fulfill their wish in the virtual. This positioning connects the space to the real world struggle for marriage equality. At the same time, the owners commoditize this fantasy through the rental of the chapel space. While Rainbow Island does not exist anymore, the marker “rainbow” continues to pervade the labeling of queer spaces.
**Haz Pazaar**

Haz Pazaar (Figure 2) was at the time the most popular gay-coded space in *Second Life* based on the number of visitors and the time those visitors spent there. Here men enjoy the company of other men as well as engage in virtual sex using “pose balls” to animate their avatars in simulated sex acts as they engage in textual cybersex. Virtual genitalia purchased by Residents (with varying levels of interactivity – e.g. erections, ejaculations and other scripted actions) enhance the experience.³ Haz takes cues from a fantasized Turkish Hammam (a space segregated by gender in which men notoriously engage in pleasure with each other) as well as the modern gay bathhouse. Here sexualized and community space collide as Haz functions both homosocially (space for community) and homosexually (space for sex). The interplay/tension of these two spatial practices continue into contemporary spaces. Haz does not exist anymore as of this writing.

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³ Within the economy of *Second Life*, there is a large market for genitalia, as standard avatars lack these particular markers of sex, relying on body shape, breasts and hair style to mark the body as male or female. Gay male Residents who participated in this study reported the necessity of having the right type of penis for successful sexual escapades.
Steam
Steam (Figure 3) more literally replicates a gay bathhouse. It includes pose balls and equipment where Residents simulate sex acts and fetishes. Pictures of scantily clad or naked men on the walls and streaming pornographic videos code this space as overtly sexual.

Sexualized spaces such as these allow men, both gay and straight, to explore fantasies in a safe space. This type of fantasy exploration took (and takes) place in earlier IRC channels and text-based MUDs (see Campbell). Some find these spaces liberatory while others feel they perpetuate the idea that gay spaces are overtly sexual. As with the other spaces so far analyzed, Steam does not exist today.

Provincetown Green
Provincetown (Figure 4) is a sim in the Dreamland development zoned as "GLBT" by land developer Anshe Chung. The “neighborhood” holds a mix of residential, commercial, and social space. A public green serves as the center of the
region (which covers a "dungeon" owned by the Naughty Frathouse, seen in the background). The Naughty Frathouse (which describes itself as the opportunity for gay men to have the fraternity experience they always wanted but could not have in college, with a focus on hazing and other types of male bondage/bonding) also provides the public pool that is seen to the right. The object in the center of the picture is a "Flying Spaghetti Monster," a fictional religious entity meant as a critique of fundamentalist religious thought and the objection to the teaching of evolution. The presence of the alternative frat house and religious icon emphasizes how queer space can be constructed as critical space confronting normative notions of masculine interaction or hegemonic religious thought.

A mix of sexual and non-sexual attractions that function symbiotically often characterizes gay neighborhoods. In discussing the place of sex culture to creating queer space Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that

The gay bars on Christopher Street draw customers from people who come here because of its sex trade. The street is cruiser because of the sex shops. The boutiques that sell freedom rings and ‘Don’t Panic’ T-shirts do more business for the same reasons. Not all of the thousands who migrate or make pilgrimages to Christopher Street use the porn shops, but all benefit from the fact that some do. After a certain point, a quantitative change is a qualitative change. A critical mass develops. The street becomes queer. It therefore becomes a base for nonporn businesses…And it becomes a political base from which to pressure politicians with a gay voting bloc.

(Berlant and Warner 326-327).

This is true in the virtual as well as the physical. The presence of open sexual culture helps maintain the space as queer.

Outside the view of Figure 4, Impulse Furniture sells “gay-themed” items. Residents purchase t-shirts there that have slogans found in the physical world (e.g. “I’m
not gay, but my girlfriend is”). Virtual consumers can also purchase rainbow flags for their homes, rainbow necklaces and other markers of queerness.

Further, the name "Provincetown" allows Residents to identify this as gay space from its association to the real. Provincetown has grown exponentially since this time as a financial venture for Anshe Chung (now part of her “Pride Continent”) and has been a center of gay space development in contemporary Second Life.

The Warehouse

The Warehouse (Figure 5), according to Residents who know the owners, attempts to create a gay space that is a "rougher version of Provincetown." Within the course of this initial exploration it went out of existence. This build simulates warehouse space, invoking danger, subversiveness, and the seedier side of gay life. It also harkens to the time (and now) when many gay establishments clustered in areas of cities that were industrial or not in use (for example, there was a large cluster of gay bars in the warehouse district of DC in Southwest before the construction of a baseball stadium in 2006). This evokes nostalgia for a time when being homosexual was enticingly more deviant, as well as being a simulcrum for typical modern gay dance spaces. Pictures of scantily-clad men, and throbbing music and lights
also contribute to coding this space as gay.

As in most other gay coded spaces, commercial vendors for gay-themed merchandise lie just outside the doors of the club. Queer is a commodity in *Second Life*, used to express queer through queer coded clothing, body parts, and household furnishings.

What is unclear is why this space disappeared. The owner probably chose to give up the space when his interest in maintaining it waned. This heightens a core issue with virtual space in that it can vanish at any time, leaving no trace of itself. This may make virtual geography, then, much less important than social networks. But, soon after the Warehouse disappeared, two other clubs appeared on private islands. Since private islands represent a large initial investment by their owner(s), they might be more likely to persist over time. This seems to be the case in current queer spaces. As of this writing, a new club called the Warehouse has opened to cater to a gay clientele.

*Rainbow Tower*

Rainbow Tower (Figure 6) represents the type of structures in *Second Life* that cannot be found in the physical world. Residents can fly up through the tower and watch a play of rainbow colored light effects and glowing orbs.

![Figure 6. Rainbow Tower](image)
The effect is beautiful and surreal. This build demonstrates how the virtual can allow the configuration of spaces completely unlike the physical world.

The tower rests in a section of the then-new north continent that is populated by a group of gay people. Rainbow flags fly over many buildings, and a blimp with a gay rainbow floats nearby. Here gay people stake claim to land in a more organic way rather than occupying a zone specifically set aside like Provincetown. Interestingly, right next door is a small plot owned by the "Wainscot Gun Club" that had a large poster on the top that says "Conquer the Rainbow." While the meaning is not explicit, this sign seems to protest against the albeit loud and gaudy Rainbow Tower. Since it was owned by a group of people who regularly use weapons in the world, one could wonder whether the owner of this sign was planning some sort of activity against the tower (what is called "griefing," a form of virtual terrorism). Was this a veiled form of homophobia or simply a complaint against an eyesore? Despite this possible threat, Rainbow Tower still exists today.

The above examples represent various articulations of spatial practices that pervaded queer spaces in Second Life in 2005. As the virtual world has grown, these practices have expanded into larger and more diverse queer spaces.

**The Explosion of Queer Space in an Expanding World**

Since 2005, Second Life has exploded in population and land mass, and so has the queer community and the spaces they inhabit. Where one found one or two islands or a scattering of clubs, whole archipelagos and multi-sim continents cater to the queer
community. Queer coded/friendly clubs and spaces number in the hundreds, and new spaces come into and out of existence every day. The spatial practices that were clear in 2005 persist in many of the spaces that exist today.

*Queer Symbols/Imagery*

Because Residents experience *Second Life* visually, queer identity is expressed most clearly in color, symbol and image. In *Second Life* symbology, the rainbow motif and the rainbow flag claims space as queer (Figure 7). Rainbow colors pervade light and floor patterns in dance clubs. Rainbow colored towels decorate the gay beaches. The names of places will either explicitly use the term gay or lesbian (e.g. “Gay World,” “GAY N HOT Beach Resort” or “Isle of Lesbos”) or harken to real world places known to be gay friendly (e.g. “Provincetown” or “Fire Island”). Also, many queer spaces use names reminiscent of Greek mythology (e.g. The Gardens of Apollo) due to common associations of homosexual love and desire to classical Greek culture.

Images of homoerotic or homosocial interaction also explicitly code a space as queer. For example, a club’s walls may be filled with pictures of half-naked (or fully
naked) men or women or gay couples kissing. These symbols and images claim the space as homonormative rather than heteronormative.

Real World Analogs

Queer spaces in Second Life relate to spaces that are found in the real world. Dance clubs, the most common social space in Second Life, provide centers of activity for Residents where they can enjoy seeing other avatars dance, listen to music, watch videos and enjoy the aesthetic pleasures of the play of light effects within the space (Figure 8). It seems strange to the observer that this can be pleasurable, as the user resigns control of their avatar in these places to a “dance ball” that animates their body in tandem and rhythm with others that are there. But together with other participants and the DJ that provides the music, the observer finds pleasure in the visual and aural field that is produced. Further, like clubs in real life, avatars join in the dance to “organize…themselves as a collective in which the individual members (become) an inseparable part of the human mass” (Buckland 101). Like in real space, the club-goer feels connected via rhythm, light and movement to other queer people present and in queer dance clubs around the world.
Other spaces draw on other analogs. Beaches or beach resorts refer back to common outdoor homosocial spaces in real life such as Provincetown or Fire Island, Rehoboth Beach, Ibiza, and others. Some go even farther to replicate the real world. For example, Provincetown sim has grown into a large development spanning many sims that seeks to give Residents the “feel” of its real world counterpart, including boardwalks and shops in a New England motif (Figure 9). Another attempts to create a “gay forest” that might remind one of wooded cruising spots such as the Ramble of Central Park or P Street Beach in Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. Spaces like these contextualize user interaction by connecting them to homosocial space in the real world.

Residents have developed some community and political resource spaces since 2005. For example, the “Transgender Resource Center” simulates a real world community/counseling center where transgender users can gather to discuss issues related
to their identity and to find others like them. Here, volunteers staff the Center so users can often find support and resources related to this population. The Gay Holocaust Memorial (Figure 10), which opened this chapter, stands as ritual space and a political symbol for the continuing struggle with discrimination and homophobia in the real world. While these community/political spaces stand out as interesting and important places that serve an educational and political purpose, they represent a very small minority of the types of queer spaces found in Second Life.

Sexualized Space

Almost as common as dance clubs, and perhaps even more so given their inclusion in many club spaces, the sex club/venue pervades the user experience of much of queer Second Life. For example, one of the highest trafficked places is “Bad Boy’s Club” where “Gay Men Meet to have great sex & Fun![sic]” (Figure 11). This club provides a labyrinthine structure lined with explicit images of naked men and men having sex in which pose balls and props are strewn. Most of the popular dance clubs also have “backrooms” that usually look the same: large pornographic images coupled with a variety of sex toys.
Sexual activity pervades *Second Life* in both the straight and the gay world because one can engage in fantasy behavior that is anonymous, non-procreative and disease free. The props and animations provide a higher level of interaction while maintaining a layer of anonymity that a webcam may not. As Berlant and Warner argue above, queer identity can have a “gay culture” that does have a variety of non-sexual components, but sexual activity is still central to the construction of queer space. As such it is not surprising that these spaces structure much of queer *Second Life*.

**Commoditized Space**

Another aspect of *Second Life* that pervades queer worldmaking there is the proliferation of commodity culture. Residents in *Second Life* constantly create, buy and sell objects within the synthetic world. In addition, the need to pay for land motivates landowners to generate revenue from a space. As such, owners tend to rent vendor space in or around a club or venue. For example, the Bad Boy’s Club mentioned above faces a courtyard lined with shops. A large mall enclosed in a metal dome serves as Impulse Island’s centerpiece (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Impulse Island's Mega Mall Dome
A continued reality of Second Life is that places come and go. Because of the costs related to creating spaces, a particular space may exist for as long as the owner has the resources or the whim to keep it running. Further, in some places owners of a space are actually renting from a larger landowner (referred to as a “land baron”). If the land baron raises rents, it may cause even a popular venue to have to move elsewhere. This was the case with a popular area known as “Boot’s Gay Beach” (Figure 13). Rising tier costs on the Pride Continent maintained by Anshe Chung forced a relocation to another sim on a competing “gay continent.”

As with venues in the real world, a place’s popularity may come and go. The popularity of many places depends on the ongoing activities that take place there. A club that is “hot” one week could be a ghost town the next. However, this is exacerbated even more by the fact that due to the ability to teleport from place to place, proximity does not matter as much. It takes no effort to travel across the world to another venue, something impossible in the real world. At the same time, there are instances of venues that have persisted over time with relatively consistent traffic. For example, Boot’s Beach has
consistently been a popular place even though it is neither a dance or sex club or a commercialized space. In this case, it seems that a particular community has grown around this place that creates a certain draw for users. In turn, because of its popularity, it attracts new users that find welcome there.

The continued construction of more and larger queer spaces shows a motivation on the part of users for these types of visible indicators of a queer community in Second Life that lays claim to territory in the virtual world. While these spaces might exist all over the virtual landscape and come in and out of existence with rapidity, particular spatial characteristics continue to pervade how these spaces are constructed. At the same time, new types of spaces bring new possibilities for queer meaning making within Second Life, such as persistent sites for community such as Provincetown or Boot’s Beach, or places for personal or political action like the Transgender Resource Center or the Gay Holocaust Museum.

Conclusion

Theorizing about space in an environment that is in constant motion is like trying to hit a moving target. Because of the dynamism of the virtual environment the changes to landscape or shift of populations within space that in the real world would take decades takes weeks. Even over the course of this study, places have come and go and even significant sites have undergone radical change. After this study, some spaces discussed will remain, some will fail; others will be populated only for a time while still others will become centers of social interaction.
In real-world space, culture becomes sedimented in particular geographic sites. Even with heterosexual encroachments on historically homo-majority spaces, the Castro or Marais will still hold a particular queered identity. Sedimentation implies depth, that history and culture is layered on top of layer of those that came before (acknowledging the dynamic and vibrant nature of the forces of globalization and cultural hybridity). Even on the web there is a particular constancy to particular sites and a history that exists when information is cached and archived all over the network. In Second Life, there seems to be a greater fluidity since entire land masses can disappear over night or the items on a particular plot can be returned to their owner’s with one button press. But, over time, pieces of queerness remain, often scattered across the landscape. In that way, a queer bricolage is formed connected not by geographic proximity or population density but a matrix of meaning through the spatial practices of queer symbol and imagery (sexual and otherwise) and analogs to the forms of queer space in the real world. This matrix exists in a three-dimensional space in which queer users can cross in and through it as well as contributing to its structure through new threads and loci of their own experience. This matrix pervades and undergirds the experience of queers in Second Life and as such has an impact on their own search for meaning and identity.
The Politics of Bodies: Avatars and Queered Identities

The expression of self not only happens within the spaces that are constructed. After all, not all users build spaces, let alone public spaces. But, every user inhabits at least one avatar. Residents project and construct a presentation of self into virtual space via the avatar. This chapter discusses the Second Life avatar and its relation to aspects of the real world self. This analysis relies in particular on the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage as a means of understanding the avatar as imago to the user.

The Pleasure of Virtual Bodies in Second Life

Second Life differs from similarly graphical virtual spaces in that there are few limitations to how an avatar might be constructed. In the Palace graphical chat space users select from a “limited choice of beautiful cartoon or doll-like images” (Thomas 379). In Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) like World of Warcraft, the user creates a character by selecting attributes that determine what that representation looks like. For example, one chooses a gender, a race (usually a fantastic type like an elf or a dwarf), and a class (or profession) which determines how they are represented within the graphical space. All elven wizards, for example, share significant similarities in how they look within the game (e.g. wear robes and have pointed ears). In Second Life, a new user selects a gender (which can be changed later at any time) and chooses a default body to start from a menu. After that, though, the possibilities for
change are endless. “There are more than 150 unique sliders [controls] for altering an avatar's traits, from foot size to eye color” (Baig). This avatar can gesture, move, emit sound effects and make facial expressions.

With the tools that are available to users (including templates that can be manipulated in graphic programs for skin and clothing), Residents can create bodies in whatever form they wish, including non-human (for example, one could have a zebra avatar in their inventory). However, total control over how the body looks takes some level of expertise, and because Second Life has a functioning economy, there is a significant market for avatar bodies, parts and accessories. One can buy clothing, jewelry, wings, purses, skins, hair and genitalia. The more “life-like” body parts look, the more expensive they are.

Whereas virtual bodies were previously expressed in text or two-dimensional image (or pre-selected from a menu of three-dimensional body choices), this new virtual body, which can be infinitely tailored to the wishes of the user, moves and interacts within a virtual environment where it can sit, jump, dance, swim (and, unlike the real world, fly) and create. This body can touch other virtual bodies, and the user can see the body interacting in space with other bodies that represent other users. While this body is generally viewed from a disembodied camera view, one also has the option to see as if looking through the eyes of the avatar itself. For example, if I were sitting down, looking “through my virtual eyes,” I could look down and see my body sitting in the chair in my
home on my piece of land in my virtual neighborhood. Unlike the narrow bandwidth of text where imagination and fantasy fills in the gaps, my virtual body is articulated in a rich graphical representation which provides visual pleasure and a greater sense of “being there” within the space. This is not to say that this is just like physical reality, but it is a type of reality, one enabled by the graphical spatiality of the interface which positions me in another body in another space which is unique because the body and the space are potentially infinitely malleable for the user.

**Queer Bodies in Second Life**

To queer theorists, *Second Life* could be considered a particular space that may disrupt norms of gender and sexuality. For example, Au describes the case of two heterosexual men who perform as female avatars within virtual space who have a romantic relationship with each other (“Man and Man”). The survey results discussed below will further reinforce the fluidity of gender and sexuality subject positions that virtual worlds enable. Judith Butler argues that when heterosexual and gender norms are disrupted, “gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm” which pose a threat to the current sexual regime (10). In the virtual, these fissures are quite clear, at least with virtual bodies. In some ways, the entire space is “queered” because the ability to take on the appearance of any body and to express self however one wishes is freely available in a way that the physical world does
not allow. Identity position, at least in the virtual space, truly is fluid. And, because of this, many people do choose to live their *Second Life* in forms that are not as they are in real life, be it as anthropomorphic animals, vampires, aliens, or others.

But, from my experience, the majority of users within *Second Life* express themselves within the space in a more or less normative way. As Campbell argued, the virtual body, even enabled in graphical space, reflects aspects of authentic self. The virtual body is constructed in relation to aspects of self as it is the presentation of self within the virtual space. Further the user’s own fantasies, desires, and sense of (or lack of) authenticity molds the avatar as well. Agency exists within the performance of the representation, the choices the user makes in constructing who they are (Tofts).

How might this agency be articulated in the formation of queer virtual bodies within *Second Life*? There are two critical issues around queer bodies expressed in this space based upon my observations of queer avatars within *Second Life*.

* Why choose to construct a queer virtual body when there are infinite possibilities for constructing a body? For some users, queer bodies in *Second Life* are constructed as a reflection of self. For others, queer is a role that they play. This delineation is partly shown in the difference in “out” and “not out” responses to the survey discussed below. This is the same type of fantasy play that has been found in virtual spaces since the times of text (Turkle). What is problematic is that unlike an anthropomorphic animal or a vampire, queer subject position is a constitutive category of identity that is articulated in
the actual world. So, its expression within virtual space potentially has implications for how one articulates identity in the actual world. For example, the queer virtual body might be a site of experimentation and learning about the queer subject position prior to further acceptance or expression of that position in real life (that is, “coming out”). It could be used as an “outlet” for certain desires that are impeded in their actual world existence. Or, as one person told me, one could choose to present as queer (in his case, bi) in Second Life because they simply enjoy virtual sex there more with male avatars than with female. In any case, the virtual queer body is chosen as either an expression of self, a potential self, or a fantasy self. One cannot make assumptions about the subject position of the person taken in actual life by the virtual body taken in Second Life, though how the virtual subject position is negotiated with the actual world self when their sexual ideation is expressed differently remains a question that could be further researched in an extension of this project, particularly if done longitudinally.

• What does a queer avatar in Second Life look like? How is it “marked” as queer?

There are particular ways to define what a queer avatar looks like or is marked. First, queer bodies in Second Life congregate in queer-coded spaces, as discussed in chapter one.

In addition, queer virtual bodies rely on commonly held indicators of queer identity, just as queer spaces rely in part on symbols and real life analogs. One of these is the use of a rainbow motif. Rainbow and pink triangle necklaces, rings and bracelets also function as ways that the avatar is coded as taking on a queer identity (Figure 14). The availability
of these markers also allow for the diffusion of these markers through the space, especially around events such as Gay Pride, usually held in Second Life in June. Queer bodies also adhere to queer stereotypical “types,” such as the “leather daddy” or the “club kid” that are identifiable as such to other queer people.

Queer avatars are explicitly marked as queer through textual indicators. This can be through the use of a gay/queer descriptor on the avatar’s related profile or membership in publicly available groups (e.g. “Gay in SL” or “Alternative Lifestyles”). Group names are available for viewing within profiles, and also can be used to display a title over the avatar name within the public space. Further, Second Life allows for the display of a name of a romantic partner in the user profile. Gay marriage is allowed in this world, so the public acknowledgment of a relationship with an avatar of the same gender would mark that avatar as performing as queer (male) within the space.

Finally, queer virtual bodies, if they are explicitly being presented as such, often manifest a particular queer sensibility, whether it is hypersexualized, differently gendered, radically realistic or highly idealized. For queers, particularly those who are attracted to
the same sex, the avatar holds additional seductions. Because virtual bodies can engage in virtual sex acts which give the users involved visual pleasure, the avatar is directly inserted into constructions of attraction which subsumes the bodily identity of user behind the avatar allowing for a variety of queered configurations of desire no matter who is involved. Further, the avatar becomes the locus of desire of the user himself. The tools in Second Life allow for the construction of a virtual body that is attractive to the user, and since through the disembodied camera the central site of visual pleasure within the interface, it likely reflects an ideal of beauty that the user desires within himself or herself as well as what the user thinks is desirable to other users. The desire to create an avatar attractive to oneself as well as to others was mentioned as motivations behind the avatars of many I interviewed.

But who are the users inhabiting these queer bodies in Second Life? And, what relation does their avatars have to their actual or physical world selves?

**Who Are the Queer Residents of Second Life?**

It is impossible to give an actual estimate of how many Residents of Second Life are queer. First, the question of population in Second Life is debated as the Resident population that Linden Lab reports includes any

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 1. Second Life Population as of May 19, 2007</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residents Logged-In During Last 7 Days</td>
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<td>Residents Logged-In During Last 14 Days</td>
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<td>Residents Logged-In During Last 30 Days</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residents Logged-In During Last 60 Days</td>
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<td>Total Residents</td>
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</table>

Source: Linden Lab (www.secondlife.com).
“uniquely named avatar with the right to log into Second Life, trade Linden Dollars and visit the Community pages” (Linden Lab “Economic Statistics”). In other words, even an account that has not been used in three years counts as a Resident. As such, the number of Residents who have logged in over various periods of time provides a better picture of the active population. Table 1 reports Second Life population figures as of May 19, 2007. While these numbers imply a large number of users, it is still unclear how many users maintain a dedicated presence over time. Another metric that can be helpful is concurrency, the number of users are on Second Life simultaneously. Currently, concurrency rates range from 26,000 to 40,000 depending on the day and time of day.

Secondly, it is difficult to obtain accurate data on sexual ideation due to the stigma related to non-majority sexual identity positions. For example, “Forrester's Consumer Technographics study of 60,000 households asked about sexual orientation for the first time, and 5% of men and 2% of women identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Forrester notes that 20% of respondents didn't answer the sexual orientation question, and guesses that "significant numbers" of lesbians and gay men chose not to identify as such.” (Wilke). However, according to respondent experiences and traffic data, there are thousands of queers in Second Life who spend a good deal of time in queer coded places.

The Resident survey I deployed was advertised through gay-coded groups as well as in the Classifieds in Second Life’s search function. As more Residents took the survey, others could more easily find the survey if they searched for “gay” or “queer” in the search function since results are ranked on popularity. All in all, 344 Residents completed the survey over the course of 3 months. While this survey cannot be taken as
representative of all queer people in Second Life given that this survey was voluntary and non-random, it does give some insight about the queer population there. Table 2 reports some of the characteristics of respondents.

Table 2. Selected Characteristics of Survey Respondents, by Outness

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<th>All</th>
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continued
Table 2, continued. Selected Characteristics of Survey Respondents, by Outness

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 reports various characteristics broken down by whether the respondent reported being “out” (that is, others know that they are queer, if they identify as such). Three quarters of the respondents were out, while a quarter was not. I reported the data this way since outness has a significant relationship to the attitudes that respondents had about being queer in Second Life. This is not meant to imply that all people with queered sexualities or genders who have not come out need to, as for many the sexual identity and gender play that goes on in Second Life does not necessarily equate to one being in a crisis of identity. Rather, those who are out have assumed a particular subject position in the act of coming out which seems to have a relation to how they relate to Second Life as opposed to those in more fluid or transitional positions.

The majority of the respondents to the survey were relatively new to Second Life. This could speak to the relatively high levels of turnover in the population or that new members are more likely to be searching for “gay” in the Search function or to be a member of the major gay groups. But, 29% of the respondents had been in Second Life

<sup>4</sup> It was pointed out by a survey respondent that “transgender” is not actually a sexual ideation, though some would say it’s a sexual identity of some sort. It was a deficiency of my survey as deployed that I did not allow a place for transgendered people to give a more nuanced view of their sexuality.
for more than 6 months, which implies a longer commitment to the platform, and some of those I interviewed had been in *Second Life* for many years. The “not out” population was generally newer to *Second Life* than the “out” population. Almost half of the total population (46%) spent more than 10 hours a week in *Second Life* with little difference between out and not out Residents.

Respondents to the survey were generally older than the average age demographics of *Second Life* Residents reported by Linden Lab, with half the respondents being over the age of 35. This could be a selection bias in that older Residents may be more likely and willing to participate in a voluntary academic study. The not out population was more likely to be younger, with 25% of the population under the age of 25 compared to 14% of the out population.

In terms of geography, 57% of the respondents reported they reside in the United States. Linden Lab reported in March 2007 that only 31% of the Resident population resides in the United States, so this could indicate a selection bias due to language barriers and how the survey was deployed (i.e. to English-speaking groups). Most respondents reported living in cities, though respondents who were not out were much more likely to live in a suburban area (though rural population was constant). This could speak to the tendency of out queer people to congregate in city centers where they can find community as well as more familiarity with the queer community in general. Three quarters of out respondents reported there was a visible gay community where they live compared to only half of the non out respondents. However, of those who have gay

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5 Age 18-24: 27%; 25-34: 39%; 35-44: 21%; 45+: 12% (Linden Lab “Key Metrics”)
communities where they live, a third of out people chose not to participate in them (possibly seeking community in Second Life instead?).

The majority (65%) of respondents to the survey were male. In February 2007 Linden Lab reported that 59% of Residents were male. The skew to males could be related to the fact that many of the large gay groups through which the survey was advertised are male dominated. What is interesting, however, is that a full 10% of the population considered themselves Male-to-Female in terms of their gender position, and 2% defined themselves as “other,” which already implies a complexity of gender positions users take. A larger number of respondents who were not out were in the Male-to-Female category.

It will come as no surprise that there are significant differences between the out and not out populations in terms of self-identified sexual ideation in real life. Among the out population, the majority (58%) identified as gay male. Those who were not out were much more likely to identify as bisexual or straight (even though they might present a different gender or sexuality within Second Life).
Respondents were asked what gender they *most* perform in *Second Life*. Table 3 reports gender played in *Second Life* most often compared to their real life gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender in SL</th>
<th>Total(n)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>MTF</th>
<th>FTM</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MTF</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally, respondents performed the same gender in *Second Life* as they did in real life, though 16% played a different gender exclusively and 23% played a different gender most of the time. Respondents were also asked whether they played other genders at any time, and 31% did (including 21% of males and 23% of females). According to one interviewee, this survey may also not capture the extent that gender play happens in *Second Life*. When asked about lesbian spaces, she opined that:

Well, the spaces exist and are marked explicitly for queer female participants. There are dozens of them! But they become overrun with straight men who are playing out a fantasy of being a lesbian by interacting with female avatars in those spaces. Such that it becomes a bit of a minefield…I mean if some guy wants to get his rocks off by fantasizing about being a lesbian, I say more power to him, but when he comes to me and tries to woo me with lies [about who they are in the physical world], then I feel very put off and taken advantage of…I walk into a lesbian club here and there are 25 women, largely all dressed and behaving in ways that I don’t perceive as “real world lesbian behavior,” then it’s difficult for me to feel like there are other actual lesbians in the space…I have heard that up to 70% of the Isle of Lesbos is straight male players.

This points out a certain irony to the “male only” policy of many of the “lesbian” or “women only” islands in *Second Life*. Since gender in *Second Life* may or may not
relate to actual gender, and it can be changed at any time with the click of a button, a “male only” policy in no way limits those who are male in the physical world from entering these space. So, in these “women only” spaces it does not matter that one is actually female, but rather that one appears to be female.

Respondents were also asked what sexual identity they most perform in *Second Life*. Table 4 reports sexual identity played most often compared to their real life self identified sexual identity. It was rare for a person who self identified as gay or lesbian in *Second Life* to play as another sexual identity. Among the other categories, though, there is a lot more variation with tendencies towards bisexual positioning. However, when one takes into account that some users play a variety of avatar forms, the fluidity of gender and sexual identity position becomes clearer. Table 5 takes into account that some respondents reported that while they have a sexual ideation they play most of the time, there are others that they play some of the time.

<p>| Table 4. Sexual Identity in Real Life by Sexual Identity Most Performed in Second Life |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Identity in SL</th>
<th>Total (n)</th>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Bi</th>
<th>Trans.</th>
<th>Queer</th>
<th>Straight</th>
<th>Other/Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Identity in RL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Fluidity of Sexual Identity and Gender Position in *Second Life*, by Real Life Sexual Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Play different sexual ideation all of the time</th>
<th>Play different sexual ideation most of the time</th>
<th>Play different sexual ideation at least some of the time</th>
<th>Play different sexual ideation OR gender at least some of the time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among those who responded to this survey, 40% reported playing a different sexual ideation than they identify as in real life with almost half reporting playing a different sexual ideation or gender at least some of the time. This type of fluidity in positioning is more prevalent in those who are in the more transitional or complicated categories of transgender, questioning, or straight (but performing some sort of gender/sexual identity queerness in *Second Life*). Gay men were significantly more rigid in their identity in *Second Life* compared to other groups, and those who were not out were much more likely to play at gender and sex than those who were out (84% for those not out vs. 35% for out respondents). This implies that those who have already gone through the coming out process have a greater stake and comfort in their particular identity position that assuages the desire to play at other identities.

However, the amount of fluidity that the respondents demonstrate does verify that within the virtual there are Butlerian fissures, as mentioned earlier, in terms of how
sexuality is constructed. In *Second Life* the questioning or transitioning can “try on” different roles and communities, and they sometimes move back and forth between these roles with regularity. Further, gender and sexual identity can be combined in new ways. For example, one respondent wrote in

I simply enjoy to act in SL as a woman – while being male in RL. Not being gay in RL and so not interested in sex with men. But in SL I enjoy having sex with men or women alike – always acting and behaving as a female. Do you classify this as “queer?”

Whether this respondent’s activities in *Second Life* are simply acts of fantasy or whether they speak to deeper complexities of gender and sexual identity that are being played out in the safe environment of *Second Life*, or a combination of both, this configuration of desire and pleasure is most definitely queer.

**Resident Attitudes About the Impact of ** *Second Life* **on Identity Formation**

Free-form environments such as *Second Life* challenge users to try new things and to explore avenues that are impossible in real life. An executive’s wife home bound after a skiing accident can log onto *Second Life* and become a casino owner and land developer who has an online husband and a close connection with the “mafia.” As ludic as this may seem, experimentation and play within an environment like this can be beneficial for the user.
Table 6. Effect of *Second Life* on Identity for Residents, by Outness in Real Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree or Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree or Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Out</td>
<td>Not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have explored my sexuality in SL in ways that I haven’t in real life.</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL has helped my sense of sexual identity in real life as well as in SL.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use SL for fantasy and play that has little to do with my real life.</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Based on 298 of 344 total respondents who answered all these questions. 74% of these responded that they were "out" in real life. 25% said they were not out. 1% of those answering this question had an unknown outness status and were excluded.

Table 6 reports Resident attitudes towards a series of questions related to identity exploration by outness. On the first measure, asking about whether the respondent has explored their sexuality in ways that they have not in real life, those who are not out responded overwhelmingly in the affirmative. This implies that *Second Life* is a site for significant experimentation for this population, particularly for those who are trying on different identities or in situations in real life that limit their access or ability to engage in a variety of sexual activity. A good number (44%) of those who are out also use *Second Life* for experimentation. For example, many sexual subcultures such as BDSM and other fetishes of power have significant presences in *Second Life*, and users can experiment with these and others in a safe and anonymous environment.

The second measure asked whether *Second Life* has had any impact on the respondent’s real life sexual identity. For almost 60% of the not out population, *Second Life* has had that type of impact. This impact seemed most profound for many in the
transgendered community, as will be discussed below. At the same time, half of the not out population desired that what happened in *Second Life*, stayed in *Second Life*, as measured by the third indicator.

It is unsurprising that a person who is out or in a solid identity position will be less likely to be impacted by an environment like *Second Life*. Those interviewees who are out in their lives generally did not feel that they had changed much from their time there, at least in terms of how they viewed their sexuality\(^6\). But, for those who were in more transitional (or repressed) spaces, *Second Life* can be significant.

According to the write-in responses to the survey, this exploration serves at least two functions: a vent for repressed desires and/or a sandbox for change. For example, one respondent stated that “[*Second Life*] has really helped me to explore the sexuality I repress in real life.” Another admits “I am a man who would probably engage in cross dressing except that I am a woman in SL and get all those urges out there. Otherwise I am strongly heterosexual.” On the other hand, *Second Life* has also been a place not for repression but for change:

*Second Life* made me realize that I have never been true to myself. I came to *Second Life* a straight married male (RL). I am now separated from my wife, and I have never been happier. And, I owe it all to two fantastic guys I have met on *Second Life*, one of who has asked me to marry him, SL and RL. It hasn’t been an easy journey…but I know hand in my heart that this is the right life for me…Thanks from a very much loved and in love guy who thanks SL from the bottom of his heart.

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\(^6\) Those interviewees who did express benefits from their experience in *Second Life* most often identified that they had a greater sense of confidence or were less shy in real life because of their time in *Second Life*. 71
In this case, the user’s experience in Second Life, primarily that of meeting someone else there with whom he could fall in love, radically changed his life.

Another young person I talked to said that “when I first came to SL, I was non-questioning person identifying as straight.” He is now in the process of questioning in RL, though completely in the closet, in part because he is from a conservative part of the country and goes to a small college. In Second Life, he has been openly gay for the most of the time he has been a Resident. While he is unsure where his process will lead in real life, his time in Second Life has made him more understanding of queer people and of himself.

Another one of my interviewees had a more radical change catalyzed by her time in Second Life.

I used to consider myself a transvestite that was basically straight, but since I got on SL a few months back, I’ve gone through a whirlwind. Now I think I am a transsexual. I’ve gone to a psychologist twice and am starting a support group next month. When I started SL, I came on as a feminine looking male wearing women’s clothes…then I met a transsexual – both rl and sl – and she basically made me realize I was thinking of myself as a female on sl, so I might as well be one…and I’ve been living as a female on sl since.

Her avatar looks as she would look after transitioning to a woman in real life. “Going out and doing things that don’t have to do with sex but doing them as a female was important to me too.” For her, the performance of a gender role was as important as engaging in sexual activity. The avatar represents the woman that this biologically male transgendered person wishes to be. The “carbon copy” is of the idealized-I rather than the conflicted Ego in physical space (who is only beginning to step through transition, which will be
difficult due to some personal complications in real life). In that way, the avatar becomes a site for the ideal Self to be expressed. The avatar body is the self feminized. When asked what makes SL different than other spaces she said “I think its just that – the graphics…seeing myself as a woman…I have gone on IMs and on phone lines playing a female…but here you see yourself as a female, doing female things…I mean, it sounds weird, but I love that I have a vagina!” This concept of an idealized-I arises out of Lacanian conceptions of Self.

**Conceptions of Online Identity in Light of Lacan**

In order to apply Lacanian concepts to *Second Life* avatars, it is helpful to discuss the avatar in light of his conceptions of Self and Other within and through the mirror stage. The avatar functions in the process of identification with the idealized-I, provides opportunities for multiplicities of self-representation and problematizes the Self/Other divide between it and its user.

According to Laetitia Wilson, “The avatar in cyberspace…– as a virtual, surrogate self – can be understood as a ‘stand-in’ for our real-space selves; a ‘visual agent that represents the user” (2). Avatars function within the Lacanian framework through the process of identification, that is, in relation to the mirror, “the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (Lacan 735). In the mirror stage, the infant identifies with the *imago* (the idealized, totalized self they see in the mirror, a complete self they can never reach). But, “identification also functions after the initial
development of the subject when the subject sees herself in another image and then incorporates this into her imaginary entity” (L. Taylor). In other words, the mirror stage persists across the life span. In this case, the avatar is the image (word-picture or graphic) that is projected into a virtual space which is “experienced as both a simple extension or duplication of the player and as the narcissistic incorporation of the image of the in-game position into the player’s specular image, allow(ing) the player to enter into the game space as a valid and verisimilar agent of the game space” (L. Taylor). The avatar functions as the user’s “self” in the virtual space through the interface. For example, in a graphic game/world, the movement of the avatar object is directly related to the actions of the player by their manipulation of the keyboard, mouse and/or controller. Similarly, in text spaces, the user’s actions and appearances are defined by what the user types, which is then presented on the screen to others in the virtual space. But, “at the same time, avatars are unequivocally other. Both limited and freed by difference from the player, they can accomplish more than the player alone; they are supernatural ambassadors of agency” (Rehak 106). Avatars can (depending on context) fly, cast spells, shoot weapons, teleport, become rich and powerful, and engage in sexual or other types of behavior than any real life human ever could in the physical world. Further, depending on the type of game or virtual space being experienced, the avatar the user and the avatar may travel a developmental life trajectory with which “the construction of the player’s...identity (can emerge) from the reflective connectivity of the player’s identification with the avatar’s
movement in the game space (a sort of alternate “mirror” reality)” (Schleiner 223). That is, over time, the user’s avatar/Self grows and changes along with the user through the course of play/interaction. The user develops and refines (or radically changes) the avatar’s appearance over time, and the avatar can grow to manifest aspects of personality very different from those the user exhibits in real life.

Avatar, then, is a catch-all term for a variety of manifestations in digital space. An avatar can be a textual description in a MUD or MOO (text based multi-user online environments), an icon in a chat space (like *The Palace*) or a three-dimensional graphic character in a game (e.g. a male Night Elf Warrior in *World of Warcraft*) or a social world (a *Second Life* avatar). Each of these types of avatars may have differing functions and “life trajectories” in relationship to the narrative or function of the virtual space they inhabit. But, either way, they represent the user within that space. In these spaces “the web user becomes a symbol, a virtual subject of a virtual world that is nevertheless always linked to a body” (Matusitz). The user looks through the mirror of the computer screen into another world in which they act (as Self) through a character (an Other) which represents them but is and is not them at the same time. But, unlike the infantile *imago*, the user can put on one avatar in one context and another in the next.

This multiplicity lies at the center of the work of Sherry Turkle, who looks at online identity as inherently fracturing of any sense of the unitary Self (the same self, *cogito*), that Lacan also decenters in his conception of the mirror stage where Ego is
defined by the Other and is always in an alienated relation). Turkle primarily explores MUDs which to her “imply difference, multiplicity, heterogeneity and fragmentation” (Turkle 185). Within MUDs, people can create multiple identities in which they explored different aspects of themselves. To Turkle, in virtual space the *imago* is shattered into multiple shards, each of which reflect aspects of Self that can be explored by the user in question for their (theoretical) betterment. To her this validates Lacan’s thinking as “Lacan insisted that ego is an illusion. In this he joins psychoanalysis to the postmodern attempt to portray the self as a realm of discourse rather than as a real thing or a permanent structure of the mind” (Turkle 178). Multiple online persona are simply parts of the signifying chain.

While the multiplicity of *imagos*/avatars within virtual space is a given, their ability to truly reflect as a mirror the user is a little more problematic. Bob Rehak argues that there has in the history of video games/virtual worlds, “that there is no perfectly ‘reflective’ avatar, that is, one that resembles the player visually and (in the fashion of a real mirror) seems to gaze back on him or her” (107). But, this does not mean that there is not a strong connection between the user and their avatar which is based within the pleasure of the action of control over the avatar Self. Rather, “willingly inverting self-other distinctions, players invest an acted-on object with the characteristics of an acting subject. That status is then rescinded in moments of avatars’ rupture to prove the object’s fundamental alterity and confirm, through contrast, the players (fictive) ego.
unity” (107). That is, the user, in the name of their pleasure, allows him/herself to walk in the shoes of the avatar as if it is a representation of their true Self. For example, a player of a sword and sorcery game may physically wince if their avatar is hit by a terrible blow from an immense creature. This only confirms the slippery, relational knots in which identity resides in that one can have a physical and emotional reaction to an effect that is only impacting the digital body. To borrow a turn of phrase from Lacanian scholar Philippe Julien: “Such is the transitivistic love of one’s neighbor [avatar?]: I feel the pain in your chest, in your slapped cheek” even if that chest and cheek is only made up of pixels (32). As such, the user is affectively invested in the avatar, despite its virtual nature. After all, how can one feel the pain of something that is only a puppet in a virtual landscape? The avatar is a virtual Other in which the Self of the user may in part reside and be reflected.

A Lacanian exploration of the concept of the avatar maps some possible trajectories in understanding the avatar in Second Life (SL) which is, in many ways, substantially different than the avatars that have come before. Unlike Turkle’s MUD-based textual Self-multiplicities, the SL avatar is constructed of infinitely malleable graphic components that function as a higher bandwidth conception of an online identity. Unlike the avatars of games/gaming worlds, the only narrative that the user in SL must follow is that which they construct for themselves within the virtual landscape. Further, the SL avatar is closer to being “reflective” of self (if chosen to be by the user) than those
avatars in the history of gaming Rehak describes. As such, the avatar, as reflection of Self, can more fully function as \textit{imago} within a virtual context.

The avatar also serves as a site for visual pleasure and judgment based on its appearance. While the \textit{Second Life} profile allows for certain levels of real life information (in a section titled “First Life), many choose not to describe themselves in any more than the simplest of terms. So, the evaluation of the Other (that is, other Residents) is made primarily on the avatar itself, not on the person behind the avatar. The desire/pleasure for/from viewing another avatar is related not to any physical attribute of the “real” person but by how the avatar is composed within the space as sign system that can be read with or without reference to the actual person (but could certainly be interpreted in such a way as to make judgments about the person behind the avatar if one chooses). This underscores the primacy of vision within the Lacanian construction of Self, as it is the visual, even in a space where anyone can look as they wish, in which the Other is discerned in a particular way.

In \textit{Second Life}, most avatars are structured as idealized physical types that would be found attractive within contemporary culture. That is, the males are muscled and lithed, the females are buxom and curvy, the hair is perfect and the countenances pleasing to the eye. Most of the interviewees when asked about their avatars said they were “like me, but better” or “a fantasy self.” In other words, most respondents reflected the concept of \textit{imago} in how they constructed their avatar. What is the attraction of the idealized-I to the
user? If there is the capacity to create any form, why do many create the Self of fantasy? I would argue that it is due in part to the relationship of the specular view of the user to the avatar itself. Second Life uses a disembodied camera as its primary means of viewing the world, a camera that has the avatar as its central point of reference. While the user has the option to view the world from the eyes of his/her avatar, the interface encourages viewing through the camera’s god-like view. Because the avatar stands in the center of this view, it becomes an object as much for viewing as for a site of interaction. So, the avatar functions as an expression of “I” but is also within the gaze of the “I.” “...The third-person point-of-view in a game does not clarify or ease the player into controlling the player-character; the play is able to identify and narcissistically embrace the player-character, but this embrace is not a clarifying or simplistically controlling embrace” (L. Taylor). The user of SL at once gazes at the avatar and the world, and if the camera is angled properly, the avatar too with its furtive stares and movements, gazes back at the user him/herself. In this moment, the avatar functions as Other, the idealized Other of the mirror in which the user derives pleasure in the looking, the looking at what they wish to be, that which they desire in a narcissistic act of the desirous gaze. “Thus the gaze is not simple or singular, the gaze is the dynamic oddity that pervades the perception of and the perceptual field of the subject” (L. Taylor). And, if one looks deep enough into the eyes of their avatar, they might see him or her self looking back out at him or herself. While earlier incarnations of online identity were powerful in their own ways through the free-
form of textual construction, the visual creates a new layer of desire based within Lacan’s seminal first struggle of the infant with the mirror, a specularity that imposes the avatar into the visual field in which the Self is construed.

And so, particularly for the transgendered person, the avatar provides an *imago* not produced in the mirror stage that represents what they believe they should be, an image they desire to bring about in their real life. The questioning can see themselves Othered in the avatar engaged in homosexual sex. The straight male can live a fantasy as a lesbian woman, or get in touch with more “feminine” aspects of themselves they feel unable to express in real life (or simply desire the avatar as something to be controlled and engaged in). The avatar can be “I,” but for many I interviewed it might also be “he” or “she” and referred to by name. The avatar, then, represents a fluidic relation of self and expression of self.

**Bodies in Space: Resident Attitudes Towards Queer Space in Second Life**

The construction of space is a creative act on the part of builders and landowners, and as such can be seen as similarly reflective of Self for those who construct them. But, without others who engage and enjoy the spaces that are created, these spaces simply become monuments to the builders and their desires. However, queer spaces also have meaning for those Residents who frequent them and thus impact their sense of identity. Table 7 reports the attitudes of respondents to queer spaces in *Second Life*. 

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Table 7. Importance of Queer Space to Residents, by Outness in Real Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Disagree or Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree or Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Out</td>
<td>Not Out</td>
<td>All Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to have queer spaces in SL to meet other GLBTQ people.</td>
<td>1% 1% 3% 6% 3% 14% 92% 96% 83%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having queer spaces increases my sense of community with other GLBTQ people in SL.</td>
<td>2% 2% 3% 13% 9% 24% 85% 89% 74%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to see more queer spaces in SL.</td>
<td>4% 3% 7% 18% 15% 26% 79% 83% 67%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Based on 309 of 344 total respondents who answered these questions. 75% of these reported that they were "out" in real life. 25% reported that they were not out. Numbers may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Respondents overwhelmingly felt that it was important to have queer spaces in Second Life in order to meet other queer people. The majority also felt that these spaces increased a sense of community and wished there were more spaces for queers in Second Life. Of various measures (including geography, presence of a gay community in real life, or length of time in Second Life), the most significant difference in attitudes came between people who were out in real life or not. This may be related to the nature of “gay” as an owned culture taken on in part in the act of coming out or that some use Second Life as a place for sexual experimentation rather than for finding community. However, this difference should not be over-emphasized as a great majority of those who are not out in real life still find queer space to be important to their experience in Second Life.
Interview participants had the opportunity to give more in-depth responses to the question of queer space in Second Life. When asked what aspects of spaces in Second Life make them particularly “queer,” many interviewees expressed words such as “freedom,” “safety” and “like-mindedness.” Even though Second Life is in general a tolerant place that is respectful of diversity, several interviewees related experiences of homophobia and discrimination there, and 20% of survey respondents reported they had experienced some form of homophobia or prejudice in SL for being queer. For example, one gay male mentioned that he had been attacked in a shop because he was outwardly gay. At the same time, gay sims have also been magnets for homophobic or gender discriminatory behavior. For example, many of the lesbian sims forbid any males from entering to prevent griefing or harassment. Provincetown too has had its share of problems. But, because areas like Provincetown are owned and controlled by queer people, they are safer than other places due to the levels of control that landowners have to expel or immobilize those who are causing trouble.

But the need for queer space is more than an issue of safety. According to another respondent “it just is” important to have queer/queer friendly spaces.

It’s a culture thing. We DO have a culture, deeply rooted of our own. In the U.S., it’s still widely because you HAVE to have a culture. In Europe, it has become so much more liberal. But we STILL need free spaces to be US. Have OUR culture. I mean...we are in many ways more diverse, colourful and demanding than most heterosexual cultures...be they ever so daring...LOL.

Another stated that what makes queer space important is their “lack of prejudice” and the “ability to relax and speak without guarding your thoughts or words.” In other
words, there is a value in queered spaces where like-minded peoples can find each other and speak the same “language.”

Queer spaces are particularly important to those who are coming out or newly out as queer people. As one respondent put it,

I think like any group, its helpful to have gathering spaces to meet folks w(ith) similar ideals, for advice and socialization/socializing. Some folks glean their sense of self from a sense of belonging to a community and for them that’s gotta be essential and less lonely…finding a mentor, examples of ‘how you do it’ is a big need.

Interviewees also described similar spatial practices that I found in the earlier analysis of queer space in their own experience. Queer spaces are marked, in particular, by rainbow flags and homoerotic and homosocial images. One respondent theorized that this is because many in the queer community were young.

Many of the community are not developmentally at a stage where they’re comfortable with their sexuality…and as a result, they tend to overcompensate. And so you see that reflected in the builds…rainbow flags everywhere…very in your face. And the community here tends towards that. So places like Blueboy [a club in Apollo], for example, tend to be popular because they have visual reminders of what it means to be gay. Couple that with the anonymity of SL, and the possibilities, and many young gay men are able to experiment with parts of community life they normally wouldn’t…[particularly sexual]…In behavioral terms, that translates into BEING GAY as opposed to being gay.

So, for queer Residents, queer spaces serve as sites for identity formation through the creation and context of the space around them as well as through interaction with the Other (other queer people) in a relatively safe environment. For those who are in transitional spaces in terms of their sexual ideation, the immersion of their avatar Selves (with which they identify) within queer coded space functions to remind and reinforce their identification with a queer subject position. And, most powerfully, queer spaces
provide context for interaction with other queers who may reflect through conversation and activity aspects of identity that they wish to express further in themselves.

**Furries and the Future of Queered Identities**

The fluidity of the avatar also enables configurations of identity that are not possible within the physical world and as such should be noted as an additional complication to the ontological categories by which sexual ideation is defined. For example, within *Second Life* there is a visible community called ‘furries’ who feel a connection to or wish to be a particular animal, real or fantastic.

As one *Second Life* resident puts it: “For me, it's just the way I feel inside, something I'd like to be. But not necessarily a real squirrel.” A popular definition of a furry is someone who has a special connection with an animal, real or imaginary … “I'd really like to be a cartoon squirrel.” Some furries would hate to be a cartoon, though (Au).

In *Second Life*, furries configure their virtual selves to conform to their mental image of their true self, an animal form. Additionally, furries construct places (like nightclubs or forest cities) where they can gather. In the imagination world of *Second Life*, the material flesh is transcended.

I'm a furry in real life, though we have some limits as to what we can do in real life… I'm rather tall and overweight in real life. I like to be small and cute, when I can be. My real body feels awkward and strange compared to the body of my fantasy … Like most furries, I can't remember ever being different (Au).

Virtual furries are an example of post/human “monstrosities” that Graham argues challenge our ontological categories of nature/culture, human/animal/machine and body/environment. Monstrosity here does not have a negative connotation; rather,
Graham sees monsters as the site where we see the struggle to understand what it means to be human. In the case of furries, *Second Life* allows new configurations of self that fulfill wishes and fantasies that one has in real life but are limited by the flesh.

As the quote above alludes, some view “furry” as an important subject position within their construction of identity. While not all furries express sexuality through their avatars, those that do could be seen as a particular type of queer that is enabled by the environment of *Second Life*. In fact, many furries align themselves with the queer community in *Second Life*. The virtual allows for the construction of new configurations of desire that do not necessarily need to have any referent to what exists in the real. And for those that are part of the furry subculture in the real world, *Second Life* is a site for powerful expressions of a group culture enabled by technology.

The furry, then, is a new type of queered identity, a hybrid digital/animal/human that speaks to the potentialities of the virtual for reconfigurations of understandings of the limits of sexuality and identity. Just as the reconfiguration of real world categories created new complexities of identities with the respondents to the survey, what other constructions of identity, sexual or otherwise, will have to be taken into account as the digital enables new imaginings that become novel types of owned culture? The promises and perils of the cyberqueer, never isolated from the real, beg to be explored within the experience of the furry, and thus merits further research.
Whither the (Actual) Body?

The queer virtual body of Second Life stands as more advanced articulation of the virtual bodies that came before it. The richness of the visual interface provides new opportunities for constructions of embodiments of desire and identity within a vibrant and pleasurable space. But what is the relation of the actual body to this particular manifestation of the virtual body? While the actual body always exists on the other side of the screen, the avatar feeds fantasies of disembodiment more powerfully than text ever could. This is its seductive danger. Textual bodies always rest within fantasies of real bodies, but bodies like these (which will only get more “realistic” with time) speak to different visual pleasures that also connect to more long-term Cartesian dreams, that “true” self could exist most profoundly within this realized and constructed body for it reflects the body that I desire for myself. For some that were interviewed, Second Life was a place where they were not “judged on appearance” or could “be themselves” or “be outgoing in ways I cannot be in real life.” Others were older, disabled or otherwise in a place where it may be difficult to fit into certain types of scenes in certain gay spaces in the real world. While experiences in Second Life can be interpreted as escape, one can also view the avatar as merely extension into another globalized cultural virtual space. And, for many users, this extension into this space can have real world impact, particularly for those who are in identity questioning and transition.
Conclusion: Virtually Queered

*Second Life* is a lifeworld of its own that is in a state of constant flux and growth. This study has attempted to map out particular theoretical trajectories around the questions of space and body through the experience of queer Residents of *Second Life* that might contribute to an emerging understanding of the meaning and function of *Second Life* for its users. Within queer places, particular spatial practices bind diverse sites together as sites of pleasure and meaning making for builders and participants. Through queer avatars, particular practices code bodies themselves as queer as well as sites for identity exploration. And, the queer bodies interacting and creating within queer spaces build new queer lifeworlds that transcend space and time in the actual and provide for new configurations of queerness and community in the virtual. Out of this analysis, several conclusions can be drawn: the importance of the geographic metaphor and mutable virtual bodies to a sense of pleasure and agency; the capacities for new configurations of sexual ideation and gender multiplicities; the role of spatial practices in binding queer spaces in the actual and the virtual together; the importance of queer life in *Second Life* to those in transitional and questioning positions; and the potentialities of *Second Life* for future political activity.

*The geographic metaphor of the simulated space of Second Life along with the capability to construct endlessly mutable virtual bodies provides a great sense of pleasure and agency for Residents.* While walking through Provincetown in *Second Life* lacks the sea spray and crowd-watching found on the boardwalk of that New England town and being placed on a rack in Bad Boy’s cannot engage the senses the same way as
a bathhouse in San Francisco would (for good or ill), Residents still attribute great pleasure and immersion to the experience of interacting in Second Life. This pleasure particularly rests in the visual, which is unsurprising since the “Cartesian tradition [accorded] primacy to sight in a way that conceptually privilege[d] the eye over the human body of which it [was] still a part, and ma[de] the eye a metaphor of the mind” (Hillis 94). While bodily experience encompasses more than vision (and the Cartesian position stands in a state of constant critique), contemporary culture is inundated and constructed through the visual. Within Second Life, the user controls both the camera and the actor, becoming a participant in and builder of the visual field. This monadic view as well as godlike capabilities to create themselves and their surroundings serves as a form of agency that empowers the user to construct new sites for meaning making both in the bodies they inhabit, the places they build or modify, or the activities and dialogue in which they engage with others from around the world.

Second Life provides new opportunities for multiplicities of gender and sexual ideation as well as new categories of queer. Queer people in Second Life represent a diversity of gender and sexual subject positions that are possible (and impossible) in the physical world. In the virtual, users can change bodies and identities at will which allows for a variety of experimentations and identity explorations. As such, the physical world self and the online self function in relation to each other, particularly when the online self reflects an Idealized-I that a person feels unable to express in the physical world due to circumstance or societal pressure. The survey and interviews revealed a significant fluidity in terms of how both gender and sexuality are played out online, particularly
among those who were not out in real life.

*Particular spatial practices permeate queered spaces that bind them together in a fluidic cultural space and connect them to the larger queer lifeworld.* Queer spaces within *Second Life* rely on queer symbology, sexual practices, commercial activity, and analogic spaces as markers that set them apart from heteronormative spaces. While many of these practices (sex and commercial activity in particular) are pervasive across *Second Life*, a queer sensibility and referential practices set queer space apart. Further, the use of commonly accepted analogues, like the dance club or the simulacra of physical world locations (e.g. Provincetown or Fire Island) places *Second Life* queer spaces in relation to those that exist in the physical world. *Second Life*, then, bridges physical world time and space allowing diasporic queer peoples to connect within transgeographical space that point to larger queer lifeworlds.

*Second Life is particularly valuable for those who are engaged in questioning or transitional sexual ideation. Second Life enables Residents to meet people from around the world and a variety of life experiences, which can be helpful for those without access to a gay community. Unlike the text/image Internet, Second Life provides visual pleasure through the sight of a body that represents the user functioning and acting within queered spaces or as another gender or sexuality. This queered virtual body becomes a site for interpersonal connection, experiential immersion and identity construction for the user struggling with their subject position as they can construct that wished to be within avatar and space. For transgendered participants, this seems particularly powerful.*

*Second Life exhibits particular aspects as a platform that could be leveraged for*
**political action.** Because *Second Life* enables individuals and groups to create and interact within transgeographical space, the platform has the ability to function as a mesonetwork between groups of queers within actual space. In other words, *Second Life* can function as a meeting place for queer people who can then engage within their local communities in the physical world. Further, the graphical nature of *Second Life* allows for the structuring of visually powerful events that can be experienced by users around the world. For example, an AIDS Memorial Quilt project could be implemented or a Pride event arranged. In June 2007, for example, the largest Pride event in *Second Life* to date was organized:

The premiere online LGBT festival, Second Pride, is about to open its virtual gates for the fourth consecutive year offering a week long celebration of love, diversity & unity.

The festival grounds, now comprised of 6 simulators (sims), will feature a variety of attractions throughout the week. The venue will include live musical and theatre acts in the amphitheatre and Unity Square, a museum highlighting the contributions of notable gay and lesbian people throughout history, an amazing dance pavilion featuring live DJs, virtual shopping, information booths, art exhibits, amusement park rides, and much more. Central to this year's event will be a memorial quilt display created by members of the Second Life community to honor those who have passed from AIDS.

In addition to being a celebration of and for the LGBT community, Second Pride is also a significant philanthropic enterprise. Proceeds from this year's fundraising activities will be donated to the Nyaka School for Children Orphaned Due to AIDS in Uganda. Donations are being made through Global Giving- a charitable organization that provides support to humanitarian efforts all over the world.

While this type of activity is certainly unable to gather as many people as would Pride in New York City, the visual playground of *Second Life* allows the construction of utopic instances of political action and visibility. While the scope of such activities are
limited for now, what possibilities will arise when a virtual pride can support thousands of people celebrating in one place? What potentials for unified action could such virtual spaces have as participation within them becomes more ubiquitous? Is there power in the construction of virtual museums or homonormative spaces that virtually concretize particular dreams of a more visible and accepted global queer community?

Further Questions

While this study was able to articulate particular realities, both virtual and actual, on the impact and importance of Second Life as a queer cultural space, particular questions remain unanswered or are in need of further study. The number of interviewees was fairly limited, and the survey only touched upon the experiences of a subsection of those who participate within Second Life. In particular, lesbian identity and the articulation of it within virtual space merits more attention. Further, the “furry” community (discussed briefly in the chapter “The Politics of Bodies”) and other communities unique to Second Life would be ideal sites for exploring how new types of virtual ethnicities create culture in virtual space.

In terms of the experiences of the questioning and transitioning, a longitudinal study over the course of six months to a year (or more) would allow a better understanding of the role of Second Life within the development of particular subject positions in the actual world. Further, a longer window of research would also allow a broader view of the articulation of spatial practices over time in the fluidic geographies of queer Second Life. Finally, a study of longer scope would be able to gauge the impact of developments within technologies in Second Life (e.g. voice) or shifting populations (e.g.
the increased internationalization of the Second Life user base).

While Second Life may not the three-dimensional platform that replaces the text/image web or fulfills the dream of Metaverse, platforms like it will be increasingly more important as graphic and bandwidth capacity on the Internet increases over time. In the future, more people, and thusly, more queers will spend more time working, creating, playing and socializing in spaces such as this. As such, it is important to begin to understand what these spaces mean for those who inhabit them. This study validates the growing importance of virtual places and virtual bodies as parallel geographies and performative extensions of self without losing sight of groundedness in actuality and embodiment in the flesh. For the moment (and the foreseeable future), bodies still matter, as does the actual world. After all, the queered avatar stands always in relation to the actual person. Yet, technologies will continue to challenge these conceptions, and it will be increasingly important to take a critical position, grounded in further research within these virtual spaces and of the articulations of identity within them so that we can ever seek the human in whatever form it takes.


Knopp, Lawrence. "Ontologies of Place, Placelessness, and Movement: Queer Quests for Identity and Their Impacts on Contemporary Geographic Thought." Gender, Place and Culture 11.1 (2004): 121-34.


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