Noncorporeal Embodiment and Gendered Virtual Identity

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation introduces the concept of noncorporeal embodiment as an analytical tool for understanding the experience of having a body in three-dimensional graphical virtual space, i.e., a representational avatar body. I propose that users of virtual worlds such as Second Life develop a sense of embodiment that is comparable but not identical to a sense of embodiment in the actual world. The dissertation explores three key areas—the development of a virtual identity, the practice of virtual sexuality, and the experience of virtual violence—to locate evidence that Second Life residents identify with their avatars in ways that reflect the concept as it is developed in the text. Methods include interviews with Second Life residents, a blog that presents questions for public response, and the use of resident-produced written materials (e.g., blogs, forum discussions, classified ads), while theoretical perspectives are drawn from feminist theorists concerned with studies of the body in various respects. The dissertation concludes with a summation of the social patterns observed in the previous chapters and with a discussion of future directions for further research.
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Glossary

Abuse Report: The official means of documenting harassment and other incidents within Second Life to notify Linden Lab.

Adult (maturity rating): A Linden Lab-defined maturity rating used to designate material with unambiguous sexual and extremely violent content, as well as land on which such content is permitted to appear in public. (Also see General and Moderate.)

ageplay: Inworld sexual content involving minors, avatars that appear to be minors, roleplay in which one or more participant is explicitly identified as impersonating a minor, or imagery of minors. It is the only kind of sexual conduct and content categorically prohibited by Linden Lab.

alt: A second or later account created by someone who already has an initial Second Life account.

animation: An asset that causes one or more avatars to engage in a particular sequence of movements.

animation overrider (AO): An attachment or viewer-embedded tool that allows an avatar to override the default Linden animations with his or her choice of custom-chosen animations.

Aristotle/Integrity: An outside company that Linden Lab contracted with to handle age verification from 2007 to 2011.

asset: A discrete piece of inworld content.

augmentationism: An approach to virtual worlds where one’s involvement in the virtual world is carried out in reference to one’s interests in the real world.

avatar: The inworld representation of a virtual world participant. In Second Life, an avatar exists in three-dimensional space and can take on a wide range of human and nonhuman appearances.

BDSM: Bondage/domination/sadism/masochism.
blitzer: An obsolete griefer implement similar to an orbiter but, due to its ability to exploit server-side code, able to propel the victim beyond the defined parameters of the grid itself; relogging would be the victim’s only course of recovery. The exploit has since been patched.

breedable: A type of inworld animal scripted to reproduce itself if its owner fulfills the product’s requirements for breeding.

build (noun, inworld): Can apply to anything that has been created but usually refers to a large project, such as a region full of buildings or a sizable art display. (In use, one would refer to “a build,” “this build,” etc.)

build (noun, viewer development): A particular version of a viewer, distinguished from previous or later versions by its build number.

build (verb): To create something from prims.

cage: An implement used by griefers to entrap victims and restrict their mobility.

calling card: An item in one’s inventory that represents a person in one’s friend list.

Class 5 Sim: Linden Lab designates sims according to the server hardware supporting them. The Class system has not been Linden Lab’s primary means of designation since 2009, but some residents persist in using the old system.

club: A social venue similar to real life dance clubs. Clubs in Second Life may present music played by an in-house DJ or may provide live music performed by a musician or group via their avatars.

Community Standards: Along with Terms of Service, the Community Standards are Linden Lab’s other main set of policies governing Second Life resident conduct.

deformer: A griefer implement designed to deform the victim’s avatar, e.g., but stretching the torso to bizarre proportions or contorting body parts into grotesque configurations.

Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA): A piece of U.S. copyright legislation that applies to inworld content.

escorting: Inworld prostitution. It may be conducted in text, on voice, or on webcam and is permitted by Linden Lab as long as it takes place in Adult-rated areas.

feral: An animal avatar that attempts to resemble the animal itself, without incorporating
any human features.

Firestorm Viewer: An open source third party viewer available for residents to connect to the Second Life grid.

Flickr: A photo-hosting website. It has no direct affiliation with Linden Lab or Second Life, but many Second Life residents use it.

deefenis: A penis attachment obtained for free.

furry fandom/furries: The furry fandom is a social sphere of individuals who relate to animals and sometimes embody anthropomorphic animal guises. Furries in Second Life are identified by the use of avatars conforming to this anthropomorphic appearance.

General (maturity rating): Formerly “PG,” a Linden Lab-defined maturity rating used to designate material that is appropriate for all ages, as well as locations in which non-General content is not permitted. (Also see Adult and Moderate.)

gesture: An asset that causes its owner’s avatar to carry out a sequence of text, animation, and/or sound events.

Gor/Goreans: Gor is a fictional world created by fantasy author John Norman. A large number of Second Life regions are devoted to realizing Norman’s concepts, such as extreme institutionalized gender inequality and slavery; those who engage in roleplay in Gor are called Goreans.

grid: The entire collection of all virtual regions that constitute the physical landscape of Second Life (or another similar virtual world).

griefing/griefer: Griefing is an attempt to harass other Second Life residents. Someone who does this is referred to as a griefer.

highlight transparent: An advanced viewer function that allows users to view transparent objects by tinting them red.

HUD (heads-up display): A visual display users can wear as an avatar attachment, allowing them to perform functions that require scripted assistance. By definition, a HUD will appear as a two-dimensional overlay in one area of the screen, beyond which the inworld environment will be visible.

hunt: A scavenger hunt-like game or event in which participants use their cameras and other tools to find prizes in a designated location. Although there are many variations, the most typical is for a hunt to be presented by store owners to
provide participants with samples of their products.

immersionism: An approach to virtual worlds where one’s involvement in the virtual world is fulfilling in and of itself, without reference to, nor as an extension of, one’s interests in the real world.

infohub: A location dedicated to providing information to new residents.

inventory: An individual account’s inworld database, essentially a folder that contains and provides access to all of the account’s personal assets.

inworld: Taking place within Second Life. The word derives from the term “in-game,” familiar to those experienced in MMORPGs, but is adapted for SL’s non-gaming environment.

lag: Any reduction in the speed of inworld performance experienced by one or more users. Sometimes further qualified as network lag (in a user’s connection), server or sim lag (occurring somewhere in Second Life itself, will be felt by anyone in a specific location), and client-side lag (related to factors at the user’s end such as computer memory and graphics settings).

landmark: An item in one’s inventory that provides direct access to a specific location on the grid.

Linden (currency): The Linden dollar, the unit of exchange within Second Life. Though its exchange value fluctuates, it usually falls within L$250-300 per U.S. dollar.

Linden (people): Employees of Linden Lab.

Linden Lab: Based in San Francisco, CA, the company that owns and runs the Second Life grid.

LSL Bridge: An attachment worn by users of some third party viewers to make use of some of the viewer’s features.

Lucky Chair: A popular method for store owners to provide free merchandise to potential customers. The chair (a board or other object may be used as well) will display a random letter of the alphabet. If you sit in the chair when your first initial is displayed, you win the specified prize.

Marketplace: A web-based online store for virtual goods maintained by Linden Lab for the use of Second Life residents.

Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs): Virtual worlds that
apply a game structure to the environment.

metaverse: The virtual universe in an abstract sense, not just on one particular grid. May refer to social networks across grids, or may be used in a Second Life context to suggest that observations are generalizable to virtual worlds or virtuality in general.

metaware: A concept original to this dissertation referring to kinds of technology that are used only indirectly by the real life user but must be manipulated through the virtually embodied self.

Midnight Mania: A popular method for store owners to provide free merchandise to potential customers while drawing foot-traffic to the store. If a designated number of individual avatars clicks a Midnight Mania board before midnight, then each one will receive a specified prize.

Moderate (maturity rating): Formerly “mature,” a Linden Lab-defined maturity rating used to designate material that is not appropriate for all ages but is not explicitly sexual or extremely violent (e.g., coarse language or nudity presented in a nonsexual context), as well as locations in which such content is publicly permitted but Adult content is not. (Also see Adult and General.)

MUD (Multi-User Dungeon): A type of text-based virtual world. MOOs (MUD, Object Oriented) and MUCKs (a play on the word “MUD,” not an actual acronym) are types of MUDs.

neko: A humanoid individual who wears some cat-like body parts, typically ears and/or tail. In some cases, paws, whiskers, and a feline skin may be worn as well. Not aesthetically or socially identical to furries.

newbie (also newb, noobie, or noob): Someone new to Second Life. “Newbie” has a more neutral connotation than “noobie” or “noob,” which are usually used to accentuate the naïveté associated with newness in the environment.

noncorporeal embodiment: A concept original to this dissertation that seeks to define how participants in virtual worlds experience their avatars as embodiments of themselves but in a way particular and unique to virtual environments.

notecard: A simple inworld text document. Notecards are saved in one’s inventory and can be shared with others as a way of passing along information inworld.

orbiter: A griefer implement used to propel a victim’s avatar far away from his or her original location.
parcel: A portion of land of variable size within a region. It is portioned off to designate ownership or use by a particular person or group.

Plurk: A micro-blogging-style social networking website. It has no formal affiliation with Linden Lab or Second Life but is popular enough among SL residents that Second Life is an option in Plurk’s country list for users’ profiles.

poseball: An object, traditionally the relative size and shape of a softball, that residents “sit” on in order to be “posed” or animated by it. They can allow more than one person to be animated together in compatible positions, e.g., for couple dancing or intimate activity.

prim/primitive: The basic building block of most inworld rezzed content. Nearly everything that appears inworld aside from avatars and landscape features like basic ground and water is constructed from prims.

rebake: The act of forcing the Second Life server to attempt to load one’s avatar’s textures on oneself again, if they failed to load correctly the first time.

region: A 256-by-256-meter segment of virtual land. The Second Life grid is divided into regions of this size to organize server resources, land ownership, and other social and technical elements.

resident: The word used to refer to people who hold accounts in Second Life; the term is an alternative to those used in more gaming-oriented virtual worlds, such as “character,” “toon,” or “player.”

Restrained Love: Formerly “Restrained Life,” a viewer and API (application programming interface) that allow users to place control over certain aspects of their avatar and/or viewer in the hands of someone else. Though it is traditionally used for BDSM and slavery roleplay, its tools have been adopted for nonsexual uses as well.

rez: To cause virtual content to materialize inworld. Usually refers to dragging an object from one’s inventory and placing it in virtual space where others can view and access it. Can also refer to one’s avatar appearing correctly to oneself and others.

roleplay: The intentional adoption of an imagined character or persona for the purpose of enacting a scene or story through one’s avatar in the virtual space.

sandbox: An area open to the public or to a specific group for the purpose of rezzing or building objects.

script: A piece of written code that, when placed inside an object inworld, will cause the
object to perform the specified functions without a user’s continued interaction with it.

Second Life (SL): A three-dimensional virtual world owned by Linden Lab and opened to the public in 2003.

shape: A worn asset that gives the avatar its physical dimensions, from height and size to minute details like nostril flare and lip cleft.

sim: Colloquially used as a synonym for “region,” a sim (short for simulator) is actually the physical server that runs a number of regions.

skin (avatar): A worn asset that makes up part of the avatar, providing tone and detail to the external appearance.

skin (viewer): An aspect of a viewer’s user interface that determines its coloring and sometimes layout and minor aspects of functionality.

skybox: A home or other building that has been placed in the sky, rather than resting on the ground. If built for that purpose, it may possess architectural features that suit it for that use, such as a lack of doors and windows.


SLVoice: The software used for voice communication within Second Life. Voice communication can place either in private calls or in public (“Local” or “Nearby”) voice.

ten grid: A separate grid, or collection of regions, supported by Linden Lab for residents aged 13 through 17. In early 2011, the teen grid was merged with the main grid and 16- to 17-year-olds permitted to join the main grid with access to General areas only.

teleport: To travel from one location in Second Life to another by having the system remove one’s avatar from the first spot and placing it instead in the new spot. In most cases, teleporting is faster than walking or flying and is often the only option when traveling between non-adjacent regions.

Terms of Service (TOS): Linden Lab’s core set of policies for Second Life.

texture: An image uploaded into Second Life, usually for the purpose of applying it to inworld content, which gives the object, body part, or clothing layer its visual color and pattern. Avatar skins, eyes, and system clothing layers are textures layered on top of one another.
tiny: A small anthropomorphic animal avatar, approximately knee-high relative to a human avatar. Despite similarities, tinies as a category are socially and culturally distinct from furries.

trolling: A general internet term for attempting to provoke others through verbal or written means.

viewer: Also sometimes called a “client,” a software application necessary for a resident to connect to and use the Second Life grid and that of similar virtual worlds.

Viewer 2: The software application Linden Lab made available as the default download for connecting to Second Life from February 2010 until the release of Viewer 3 in August 2011.

virtual world (VW): In an internet context, a persistent representation of physical space in which participants share a more or less common visual experience.

Vivox: The creator of the SLVoice software used for connecting to voice within Second Life.


yaoi: A genre of anime, manga, fiction, fanfiction, art, etc., that portrays young men in homosexual or homoerotic relations with one another, usually for the enjoyment of female consumers.

Zindra: Second Life’s fully Adult-rated continent.
Chapter 1: One’s Bodies, One’s Selves

In recent years, online virtual worlds have grown in popularity and content size to the point where examining the cultures within them has become a worthwhile project for researchers. Most heavily populated virtual worlds are built as games, with goals and structures that shape users’ participation and the kinds of community they are likely to form. A key exception is the more open-ended world of Second Life (SL), a virtual world in which nearly all of the content—both “physical” and social—is user-created, and currently the only non-game virtual world of its size. SL thus provides users with a unique platform for establishing social interaction amid a new set of circumstances that are simultaneously mediated by the specific opportunities and limitations inherent to what I call noncorporeal embodiment and unmediated by any predetermined structure. SL also thus attracts a much broader cross-section of users than are likely drawn to more traditional MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) and seems to garner more attention in the mainstream media for events that take place inworld. For all of these reasons, Second Life provides scholars in the humanities and social sciences with an especially rich context for examining various dimensions of social interaction. It is a particularly good space for exploring dynamics of gender and sexuality.

In this dissertation, I argue that what I call noncorporeal embodiment—the use of the avatar as one’s physical representation inworld, as well as the many implications that
stem from this type of embodiment—is central to organizing the construction, performance, and experience of having gender and sexuality in Second Life. In the following chapters, I explore several dimensions of this particular type of subjectivity, as the study of virtual worlds and their use for numerous purposes, from entertainment and commerce to education and art, appears to be on the rise, with increasingly complex forms of internet communication becoming more central to day-to-day interaction among computer users. Observers of technological culture development like Wagner James Au (2008:222) suggest that the “metaverse,” the virtual universe as a whole, has the potential to expand beyond its current programming to become definitive of internet interaction. Even if Au’s projection is optimistic, examining the ways in which internet users experience themselves through their online representations can allow for a greater understanding of mediated communication, on the one hand, and the meaning of embodiment, on the other. I propose that interaction within virtual worlds—and particularly clearly within Second Life’s open-ended platform—constitutes a new space for exploring the ways in which humans comprehend, experience, and enact subjectivity and continually negotiate the boundaries of gendered embodiment.

The dissertation addresses two central questions: 1) What can we learn about the construction of gender and sexuality through examining a social context in which even the physical and material are socially constructed and the only restraints on the expression of socially and bodily gendered traits are self-imposed? 2) How do

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1 One could argue, of course, that all material objects in the actual, non-virtual world are socially constructed, as well. Research in virtual worlds, in fact, can help to illuminate the ways in which this is true, but it can only do so if one starts from the assumption that virtual constructions are more easily recognizable as constructions than their equivalents in the actual world. For my distinction between the concepts of “virtual” and “actual,” I borrow from Boellstorff (2008).
constructions of gender and sexuality in such a context reflect or challenge existing feminist theory on gender identity, performativity, and gender-related violence? Through an analysis of three areas—identity, sexuality, and violence—I conclude that the avatar, as the site of interaction within Second Life, becomes invested with meaning through constructs drawn from both actual life and Second Life, constructs that shift in salience and significance through processes of personal and social renegotiation.

General Theoretical Approach and Research Design

The dissertation is conceptually grounded in feminist theory that examines the relationship between the body and identity and the ways in which both are culturally mediated, especially by new technologies, as well as theories of violence and sexuality and of performativity. Rather than locating my approach within a specific theoretical tradition, I adopted a “cafeteria” approach to theory (Cahill 2001:71), drawing from previous work from various theoretical areas as it contributes to understanding how having a representational body that is not identical to the corporeal one shapes and is shaped by individual and social experiences and perceptions of gender and race. At times, this approach has brought together areas of previous research that do not intuitively belong together, but virtual realms tend to have that effect on various levels, juxtaposing the familiar with the conceptual and blurring the lines that define either as such.

In my research I approached the overall landscape of Second Life as a social construct (or collection of social constructs) relative to the actual world, in the sense that those limitations on what may be imagined and created were at one point themselves imagined and created, not predetermined by a physical environment that imposes
absolute restrictions on human (or other) potential. At the same time, residents\(^2\) are able to interact within Second Life—with each other and with the content—in ways more easily understood from a poststructuralist standpoint, using Linden-given tools to extend beyond what is possible in the actual world and creating their own tools to challenge even the limitations imposed by Linden Lab. I thus have conceptualized and applied structuralism and poststructuralism not as contradictory frameworks for understanding the topics at hand but more as approaches best suited for examining different (and non-dichotomous) areas.

In addition, my research incorporated some promising approaches in feminist theory that aim to make the physical body more present in social theory and the humanities, taking as an example the emergence of the concept of “new materialism” in theoretical debates among feminists over whether the biological body has become the proverbial baby to the bathwater of essentialism (Ahmed, 2008; Davis, 2009; Hird 2004). Complicating these discussions, which (re-)emphasize the material body in the generation of feminist theory, my research suggests that for many people, the body is experienced in ways that recommend a rethinking of what constitutes the body’s materiality itself. I propose that bodies are increasingly mediated by technologies (e.g., communications technologies), albeit some more than others, and that studying the virtual body can

\(^2\) Linden Lab refers to Second Life account holders as “Residents” to distinguish the platform-account holder relationship as one in which LL provides a spatial geography where SL account holders reside and are free to use the space largely as they choose. The term’s significance lies also in the rejection of terms favored in previous virtual worlds, such as “player” and “user.” Although many SL account holders, especially those with previous experience in virtual gaming environments, refer to SL as a game, many others do not, and Linden Lab discourages this characterization, in part, by avoiding the word “player” in referring to account holders (http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Resident, last modified 9 April 2009, accessed 1 March 2010). I adopt the word “resident” here, as well, but not LL’s capitalization, to retain the word’s connotations but to reflect its casual use among residents themselves.
contribute to scholarship on embodiment by helping to identify how the body is implicated even when it is not corporeally there. Toward this end, I have drawn from authors who have recently theorized, on the one hand, the implications of technological mediation of the body and, on the other hand, the state of having (or being) an avatar in an electronic virtual space with its own range of cultural norms and conditions of embodiment. The work of Rosi Braidotti and Tom Boellstorff is well suited to these respective areas.

Embodiment and Technology

In her book *Transpositions* (2006), Rosi Braidotti recommends a “nomadic” approach to viewing the interconnectivity of what are often addressed as separate systems: social, cultural, biological, technological, political, and so on, and their relationship to bodies. She applies Michel Foucault’s notion of “bio-power” and Donna Haraway’s “informatics of domination” to twenty-first century platforms of communication and thus power (in the Foucauldian sense), suggesting that the “convergence of bio-technologies with the new information and communication technologies, backed by the Internet, is a major factor in inducing a radical revision of body-politics” (48). More specifically, the “biological and the informational bodies converge into a new subject compound, which is nomadic and hence not unitary, hybrid and hence impure, and denaturalized through technological mediation and hence post-humanist” (96). My research explored this “new subject compound,” which I find is readily visible through my concept of noncorporeal embodiment in an electronic virtual world in which one’s biological body and one’s representational body are different and
yet, simultaneously, intimately interconnected.

Braidotti examines a variation on the nature/culture, mind/body dichotomies that are familiar in feminist theory, this time defining them as different types of life, bios and zoe, where zoe stands for biological, ecological life, that which continues without conscious cultivation on the part of living beings, and bios refers to discursive, “intelligent” life, the sole province of human experience (2006:36-7). Illustrating how this dichotomy can be transposed onto an understanding of physical life allows Braidotti to observe how bios and zoe “coincide on the human body” and turn “the issue of embodiment into a contested space and a political arena” (37). Whilst mind/body dualisms have historically been used to naturalize difference along race and gender lines, Braidotti observes how technologies of the body complicate the notion of the “natural” body, challenging the very dichotomy she identifies. In this way, Braidotti applies her bios/zoe-centered vision to “the technologically mediated subject of postmodernity” (42).

If one posits that technology has, in “Western” thought, been primarily associated with the culture/mind/human side of various dualisms, then a perspective challenging the notion of subjectivity as inherently individualistic and framing the body as “an ecological unit” characterized by its continual intercommunication with its surroundings (Braidotti 2006:41), the use of technology can be seen as an embodied practice that extends subjectivity beyond the epidermis, taking into account one’s relationship with the mechanisms one uses to enact and/or experience subjectivity and the ways these mechanisms shape interpersonal communication. This is a rhizomatic conceptualization of subjectivity, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s use of the term “rhizome” (for
instance, in 1987:3-25): the social and technological circumstances of one’s subjectivity are as necessary for the understanding of having a self as is one’s biological state. Braidotti draws heavily from Deleuze and Guattari in describing the function of *zoe*. One way to challenge the construction of individualistic subjectivity is through examining virtual subjectivity, mediated by noncorporeal embodiment. For research in the context of a graphic virtual world such as Second Life, I have used “noncorporeal embodiment” as a conceptual tool to analyze a digital representation of the self that is, through the physical matter that gives it being—keyboard, mouse, programming, the biological fingers that give it form and purpose, the eyes that take in its environment—interconnected with one’s corporeal form. Although I use the term to refer to the representational body, the avatar, in my analyses, I have kept in mind that this body cannot function independently from a corporeally embodied human and still be subject to this definition. Simultaneously, corporeally embodied subjects cannot create this type of representational body without some form of technological mediation. This is explored more fully in Chapter 2.

Another key feature of noncorporeal embodiment is the process of creation. Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, in his ethnography of Second Life, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), applies the concept of *techne* as a type of knowledge and a type of

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3 Second Life may nonetheless be used by those with disabilities affecting vision or movement if they have the technological equipment necessary.

4 Some avatars in Second Life, called bots, are created to exist without a human at the controls all or most of the time. Some simply exist in space, for instance, to model clothes; others are given artificial intelligence that allows rudimentary communication with other avatars. I will not be applying the concept of noncorporeal embodiment to these avatars in this work, since they do not possess the type of subjectivity the term is meant to reference.
life distinct from *episteme*. While episteme is what one “knows,” techne emphasizes the process of creation, technique, the interaction of the subject with her or his environment. The virtual human, he suggests, is defined not by what he or she can know but by what he or she can craft, and what the virtual human crafts is “gaps,” “between the world as it was before [an] action, and the new world it calls into being” (55). Although Boellstorff’s *homo cyber*, the virtual human, connotes an individualism recalling Braidotti’s *bios*, human life defined for the ability to reason and thereby set apart from nature, for my research I emphasized the elements of techne that connect the human subject with the technological and social environment throughout and as part of its own creation.

One reason Second Life has become a popular environment for virtual world study is its free-form platform (e.g. Au 2008:xviii; Boellstorff 2008:96), which allows residents to create many different kinds of physical and practical content and to develop, contribute to, and profit from a local economy based on the inworld currency of the Linden dollar (L$). One feature that sets SL off from nearly any other virtual world is that residents are, under the Terms of Service, the holders of intellectual property rights for anything they create inworld (Au 2008:128). Second Life’s physical and contractual offerings thus contribute to the culture as a culture of creation, both for those who create virtual material objects and for those who find personalized uses for them.

The process of creating one’s avatar reflects aspects of both Boellstorff’s *techne* and Braidotti’s *bios/zoe*. Residents compile their virtual physical being by creating or by

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5 Although these concepts date back to the ancient Greeks as analytical terms and have been employed by Plato, Socrates, and students of their philosophies for centuries to follow (Roochnik 1996:3), I am concerned specifically with Boellstorff’s application.
acquiring as the creations of others the many components that give them visual presence. These components connect residents to a vast number of designers, co-consumers, Linden Lab developers, acquaintances and fashion promoters who may shape personal taste, and real life influences on budget, style, and time constraints, just to name a few elements that are present in what, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, might be considered the avatar’s assemblage. The avatar thus develops from a metaphoric gene pool but not a unidirectional, linear one. This gene pool’s rhizomatic shape is compatible with the notion of **zoe**, in which all life is recognized as interconnected, while **bios** and **techne** are apparent in the multiple technological and creative structures undergirding the assemblage’s apparatus and the process of compiling the components into something that residents may experience as a form of life.

In this dissertation, I propose that through the agency of creating an avatar or avatars, whether inspired by a real life model, shaped by pop culture references, or spawned thoroughly from imagination, the subject gains a sense of embodiment mediated by the avatar. The concept of noncorporeal embodiment brings the theories of **bios/zoe** and **techne** together in the avatar as a medium for transferring corporeal selfhood into a noncorporeal field while/through learning new functions of corporeality. That one can experience oneself as virtually embodied in this way adds complexity to the relationship that a touching, feeling, space-inhabiting body has with its environment. Second Life has provided a visible, concrete testing ground for this proposal, but it is possible that other (including non-electronic) virtual embodiments could be identified and examined for

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6 Many other elements are less physical but are nonetheless part of what I’d regard as the avatar’s anatomy. I expound on these in more detail in the Chapter 2.
their significance to the experience of actual embodiment.

I believe that understanding the noncorporeal side of embodiment—by looking at how people interact when they have bodies that move, that can be dressed, that can take on nearly any form imaginable, but that cannot be permanently harmed, that can be violated not due to the strength or weakness of the physique but due only to a user’s possession or lack of cultural and technical knowledge—can contribute to a new perspective on common theories and assumptions about what it means to have a body, especially a gendered body, when it is corporeal as well. This dissertation focuses on identity, sexuality, and violence in Second Life as points of social interaction that highlight the ways in which Second Life residents experience themselves as embodied.

Next I describe these three areas and the theories that informed my research. Here the concept of a “cafeteria” approach to theory is once again visible in that, rather than attempting to explain a broad range of interactions through a single perspective, I apply different theories to each area as the theories prove informative to the subjects at hand. My objective has been to use the virtual world of Second Life and its extraordinarily rich social environment as a sort of looking glass onto “real life.” Just as storybook children like Alice, Dorothy, the Darlings, the Pevensies, and many others learn to view their mundane lives anew through their journeys in Wonderland, Oz, Neverland, and Narnia, specifically because these worlds are both similar to and quite apart from their own, I find that Second Life can serve an equivalent purpose, by allowing us to see whether the usual ideas apply when some of the circumstances the ideas are based on are shifted.

Theory and Methods: Identity
One of the events that guided me toward this dissertation topic was a Virtual Praxis held in the fall of 2008 on women’s community in Second Life organized in the main by Ohio State lecturer Sharon Collingwood (Ellie Brewster in SL). Though I already knew by then that I wished to write about gender in/and virtual worlds, I did not yet have a clear idea what my specific focus would be. Trying to develop something that would fit within the praxis theme led me to think about some general questions (e.g., How was “women” being defined in the title of the event?) and about experiences I’d had during my first six months in Second Life that would add depth to the questions. I considered the literature associated with a region I’d discovered quite by accident, a private “women’s” relaxation park with residential properties and common recreational areas. Based on the descriptive information distributed to visitors and members, I developed an analysis of how gender was being constructed by the owners of the park and how it might influence the performance of or experience of having a female avatar. The definitions of “sex” and “gender” in gendered virtual communities may or may not be explicitly drawn out by those who provide the space and moderate group membership. Here I outline the existing bodies of performance theory that contributed to my research design, draw out how I have conceptualized gender for the purpose of this research, and explain my methodology for exploring virtual gender through communities as spaces of interaction. This section on identity as a focus for research addresses how I

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7 Each Second Life account is permitted to belong to a maximum of forty-two “Groups.” The purpose of affiliation with Groups varies but may include receiving notices of new releases and Group-only gifts at stores, permission to place and leave objects on property associated with the Group, technical support through Group instant messaging, or simply being able to display Group membership in one’s profile. Most Groups offer open membership (residents can join or leave at will and for free), but Group owners can, if they wish, impose a membership fee or restrict membership to specific persons.
considered such factors in the experience of having a gendered body as performativity in virtual gendered community and the physical-technological implements that functionally connect the actual and virtual selves.

I began research with the premise that conceptualizing gender in a virtual context—much like experiencing it in one—means being affected by existing actual-world paradigms while being open to recognizing the ways virtuality exerts its own influence. Commenting on the absence of agency in some models of social construction, Judith Butler observes that a model that takes sex as biological and gender as social “suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law” (1999:12). She goes on to note that a question of free will versus determinism arises from this interpretation, in which gender seems to be perceived as voluntarily built on nature-given raw material, but where raw material ends and gender begins is eternally debatable, to the point where the raw material itself can be understood as constructed as such, including by the imposition of gender categories themselves.

Applying this discussion to avatars and gender in a virtual environment, these dichotomies—free will and determinism, constructions and raw material—are simultaneously simplified and complicated. On the one hand, there are some pieces of raw material provided by the Second Life platform, such as the obligation to use an avatar in order to interact, the existence of two options (female and male) for acquiring a default avatar shape, and the obligation to choose between them; all else seems to be the product of “free will,” including the choice users make between making their avatars
female or male or to begin with one of these defaults yet develop an alternative shape. Thus, even the bodies and body parts that comprise what is commonly thought of as “sex,” in Second Life, are by a different definition gender, and ideas about what a properly gendered body is supposed to look like are part of the body’s social and physical construction. On the other hand, virtual worlds and the actual world function as interrelated, and in this sense the distinction between what is “raw material” and what is “constructed” is once again blurred. Residents might develop perceptions of gender construction that are primarily based on how male-bodied, female-bodied, and shifting-bodied avatars appear to behave, perceptions that may be strongly, weakly, or barely informed by actual-world conventions, depending on the individual, her or his virtual communities, and outlooks on gender. One must thus address how representational or performative elements are shaped by environmental or preexisting factors—and what counts as a preexisting factor—within and across the two domains of virtual and actual space instead of the single domain of the actual on which discussions of performativity like Butler’s are usually based.

For the purpose of my project, I used the concept of gender in a virtual context in a manner that drew from both of these interpretations. The aspect of gender that seemed to be most relevant to this research was the way that Second Life residents construct avatars, both physically and behaviorally, using the tools given to them by Linden Lab. I did not lose sight of the complexities underlying the choices residents make in the process of this construction, however, and I do not imply that “choice” equates with “free will.” Gender construction in this context resembles the concept of performativity in
ways that relate to Butler’s use of the term. She suggests that performativity is “that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names” (1997:111-12), and the process of creating an avatar that others will read as female or male, feminine or masculine, is a concrete example of producing that which the software names (female or male) and utilizes a number of discursive methods to convey gendered meaning, including the graphic/visual, the textual, and sometimes the spoken. Theories of performativity have already entered feminist internet culture scholarship, as in the work of Angela Thomas (2007), who suggests that in cyberspace, the opportunities for play and experimentation with gender and sexuality are as informative as the degree to which individuals choose not to take advantage of them (19).

Viewing the avatar as a site of gender performance and discourse production also calls attention to residents’ use of avatars as an embodied experience figuring into their online identities. Internet researchers have noted that even before graphic representations of the self in cyberspace became commonplace, internet users seemed to experience certain aspects of online interaction as embodied (Thomas 2007:12). Julian Dibbell’s account of “A Rape in Cyberspace” (1998) describes an incident in the text-based virtual world\(^8\) of LambdaMOO in which a sexual assault against several “characters” was carried out in a public location by a relative stranger to the community. Dibbell suggests that in the aftermath, the ability of witnesses and other third parties to recognize the incident as one with embodied consequences for the victim/survivors seems to be what separates members of the affected virtual community from “two basically subcompetent types,” the

\(^8\) In such a space, one types and reads one’s actions and those of others in a chat-style forum rather than moving a visual representation of oneself through a physical environment.
newbie and the sociopath (23), attaching a sense of virtual embodiment (or at least the ability to recognize that sense as legitimate for others) to successful enculturation into the community. As T.L. Taylor explains, “The bodies users create and use in virtual spaces become inextricably linked to their performance of self and engagement in the community” (1999:438), and the Second Life platform makes this element of performance/engagement literal by establishing avatar embodiment as a prerequisite for having a presence within this world. Thomas suggests that thinking of “online identities as embodied selves” is important because of “the connectedness between the corporeal body and the perceptions and experiences lived out on the screen,” “the visual embodied image of the self,” and “the dimension of identity performance” (2007:14). While all of these authors and others emphasize the ways in which users of online environments experience their online presences as embodied, I began with the intent to explore this as a particular kind of embodiment, which I call noncorporeal embodiment, to indicate, among other things, that the lack of fixedness to any particular corporeal shape or state is as important to avatar identity, including gender identity, as is the sense of embodiment within the form of one’s own construction.

I began with the area of community for the purpose of exploring gender identity and embodiment because in my preliminary research I observed residents engaged in a performative, dynamic process of learning how to express gender via a set of tools and signs in the context and company of others who are doing the same. I extended the

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9 In other words, Dibbell suggests that an acceptance of virtual embodiment is part of having a presence in virtual worlds. Although this can apply in widely varying degrees, those who cannot even comprehend it are probably either too new to the context to feel invested in their virtual representations (i.e., newbies) or, despite being virtually seasoned, persist in viewing others in the environment as objects (i.e., sociopaths).
research into examining how structural and technological factors such as the software used to connect to the virtual world contribute to the development of identity, as well. For research, I proposed that the ways in which gender is conveyed in Second Life would be shaped but not determined by the ways residents understand it to be conveyed in their first lives. A resident constructing an avatar does several things at once: 1) She learns to master the platform’s resources, thereby engaging in Boellstorff’s concept of techne; 2) she learns the visual and textual discourses of gender, race, age, species, and other attributes as they are written/imaged/spoken in Second Life as a whole and the subcultures she finds herself in; 3) she responds by matching or resisting, accepting or revising, these discourses and the ways she expresses herself in them; 4) she develops a sense of embodiment with respect to the avatar she uses throughout all of these processes, whether she opts for a single stable appearance, a constantly shifting one, or a few interchangeable physiques.

To examine my proposition, I used two main research methods: a weblog (blog) created for presenting open discussion topics pertaining to gender and sexuality in Second Life and individual interviews with some residents who are able to address one or more of my focus areas of identity, sexuality, and violence. Here I explain the choice of methods, focusing at this time on how I examined the contributions of community and technology to the development of identity through these means.

Through interviews and blog discussions, I explored how Second Life residents developed their virtual gender identities, particularly with respect to how and whether their identities were shaped by their virtual social contexts. I assumed that interview
participants who have spent time in single-gender communities might have particularly relevant experiences to share, in that forming a social meaning for what it is to belong to that gender occurs in conjunction with learning how to indicate through the avatar that one believes oneself to belong. I planned to take a closer look at the dynamic between gender performance and its context, in the absence of a visible corporeal body, as a means to understanding gender performance in corporeal contexts as well.

The owners of the Park that inspired my earlier paper are an example; by designating the Park for “women only” (without indicating whether this refers to avatars or actual embodiment) because of past behaviors of “men” (apparently meaning male avatars), they attached femaleness to a particular avatar form while simultaneously disassociating female avatar embodiment from a set of behaviors to which male avatars are, in their view, more prone. The implications of the convergence among avatar “sex,” avatars’ behaviors, and the ways in which the latter were interpreted with respect to the former are subject to further discussion. What allows this example to stand out, however, to illustrate how gender performance can be studied from unique angles in a virtual world, is that biological sex can be addressed as a factor of indeterminate and shifting significance. In this example, ideas about biological sex inform the perception that gender, sex, and gendered behavior may be viewed dichotomously within a subculture, but it slips into the background when applied to individuals: no Park visitors were asked to reveal their actual world sexes in the incidents that led to the Park’s sex restriction; the constructions of gender developed within the virtual world took precedence in defining sex.
The other area I explored for the subject of identity was how the more technical aspects of virtual being shape how Second Life residents form a sense of who they are in relation to their avatars. I expected this would apply not only to gender identity but to an overall sense of virtual or noncorporeal embodiment. I explored how the software used to connect to Second Life, the concept of inventory, and the way these factors secure an association between the actual and virtual bodies would all function as part of the avatar assemblage in conjunction with the user’s relationships with her inworld communities.

My goal with regard to exploring gendered community and embodied technology in virtual space was to see if doing so would highlight the significance of performativity in the experience of having a gendered body. Although gender performance can be researched in the actual world with a non-fixed view of biological sex and its significance to the research goals, I proposed, first, that virtual worlds provide a space in which the role of the physical body is more readily complicated than is taken for granted, and second, that gender theory developed in a context in which that is the case could be illuminating for research in the actual world that strives to do the same.

Theory and Methods: Sexuality

Even though virtual sex, defined broadly, has existed in many media of communication available, including text-based cybersex, “sexting” through mobile phones, and vocal phone sex, cultural mores seem to regard it as a fringe activity performed only when physical contact is not an option. The association between the introduction of new communication media and its immediate application to sexual content, however, is infamous, whether that content is of a producer/consumer variety
such as pornography or whether it is interactive. Second Life is no exception; the prevalence of sex in Second Life is such that a Google search of the words “sex and second life” brings up over 476 million results. The Canadian Broadcasting Company’s *Fifth Estate* newsmagazine series produced a full-length episode on sexuality in Second Life in January 2009. Among the topics that generated the most active discussion on Second Life’s web-based forum and many other Second Life-oriented blogs online in 2009 was Linden Lab’s creation of an “adult continent” “red-light district” that came to be called Zindra. Linden Lab’s efforts to mediate SL residents’ sexual activity is written into the Terms of Service (section 8.2.iii), with significant restrictions on where it may take place but very few restrictions on what may take place. Prostitution (usually termed “escorting”), for instance, is permitted and is one of the higher paid occupations inworld (Cavalli 2009), and Linden Lab’s only regulations concerning the type of activity residents may engage in are those that prohibit “ageplay” (sexual activity in which at least one avatar resembles and/or roleplays a minor) and the circulation of child pornography.

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10 In 2009 a Google search of the same terms brought up 62 million hits, and articles from *Information Week* (Wagner 2007), the *Village Voice* (Ruberg 2007), and *Wired* (Lynn 2006) all appeared on the first page (Accessed 1 February). The more recent search brings up many of the same articles among the top choices but also a piece from *Nerve* (Gibson 2011) and a recent article that appeared in online gaming news website *Massively*. The *Massively* piece revisits a 2007 documentary of Second Life and discusses how sex has been covered in films like it over time: “Name the last MMO documentary that featured art and social interaction more than virtual sex or gaming addiction and I’ll buy you a hot dog” (Hindman 2012). This quick search suggests that the period of 2006-07 was at the height of mainstream media’s interest in Second Life and that the external fascination has dropped off since then, but the ballooning of the search results makes it clear that the subject is still discussed.


Many people begin using Second Life with an explicit interest in exploring its sexual content. The graphic, three-dimensional, user-created character of the platform allows residents a vast range of opportunity to construct the tools and settings for enacting fantasies of near-infinite variety, both sexual and non-sexual. Whether one’s fantasy is to make love to one’s actual spouse’s avatar at the top of an Eiffel Tower replica or to participate in a poly-gendered sex romp with a band of elves, any restrictions on the realization of the fantasy are informal (e.g., being able to build or locate the settings one desires and finding willing partners), not systemic.

It is intriguing to consider, given the broader range of possibility in virtuality, that sexualities may develop that can only exist virtually or that come into being because of the options virtual reality provides. By this I do not mean sexual activity or sexual content alone, as that is readily apparent in the availability of consumer products and the presence of specially equipped locations to serve any number of exclusively virtual interests. I mean, rather, something more analogous to a sexual identity as the phrase may be used to understand more familiar identity categories like lesbian, fetishist, or polyamorous. There is no consensus among activists or scholars regarding the usefulness of recognizing or emphasizing sexual identities, but I did not explore those debates in this dissertation. I began this research with the (in my opinion more basic) standpoint that some people use identity categories to understand themselves in relation to others who use the same ones and that sexual identities may be felt by some to socially validate desires or interests that they otherwise might experience as marginalized.

(Updated 13 May 2010, Accessed 14 September 2010).
I explored three communities built on largely virtual and to varying degrees sexual identities. One that I examined arises from “yaoi,” which is “a genre of Japanese cartoons and comics … produced by female artists for essentially female audiences” which features “romantic and sexual relationships between males” (Zanghellini 2009:159). Typically, yaoi appears in anime, manga, and novel forms, but fans who wish to extend their interest into more interactive domains can and do participate in yaoi-inspired culture in Second Life and other virtual worlds. That is, real life women use male avatars to engage in homoerotic interaction with one another and with other male avatars. Part of my research in the area of sexuality was to explore how female yaoi fans who enact male homoeroticism in Second Life constructed and experienced their virtual embodiment. In contrast with the members of the women’s relaxation park, whose virtual gender might be assumed—but is not necessarily known—to reflect their actual bodies, female yaoi fans who use male avatars for homosexual activity construct a gendered embodiment that has no direct actual life correlate.

The other two communities I looked at were larger and more visible within Second Life than yaoi, which was relatively minor in scale. Goreans constitute a roleplaying community based on a series of science fiction books in which men claim complete and unambiguous domination over women, many of whom are sexual slaves. In Second Life, residents take on these roles voluntarily to embody a culture of slavery and subordination that would be difficult to sustain outside of a virtual setting. Furries, typified by the wearing of anthropomorphized animal guises not unlike many popular cartoon characters, are not a sexual subculture as such but often enact sexuality in ways
that are in keeping with their furry identity. Some people identify with the furry fandom in the actual world, but I supposed that the logistics of an avatar (in comparison with a sports mascot-like “fur suit”) would allow greater sexual expression in a virtual context than can be undertaken (or socially accepted) in the real world. Taking these three Second Life communities as examples, I explored how virtual space enhances sexuality into areas that have no easy real life equivalents.

Researching virtual sexual identity can generate significant contributions to research on sexual identities in non-virtual contexts. Sexual identities can provide validation to those who may feel lost, alone, or marginalized if they believe they are in a scant minority of people who experience a given type of sexual desire. This outlook implies that an individual might feel she has an essential sexual proclivity that simply lacks a name, and that finding others with the same essential proclivity—and a means of referring to it—is a positive development. Applying social constructionist theory to this approach, however, introduces the notion that the very existence of identity categories shapes the experiences and self-understandings of those who adopt them. Poststructuralist and Butlerian performance theory might go even further to focus on the reiteration of the acts or concepts that socially define the identity categories, holding that the sense of having an “essential proclivity” occurs simultaneously with the means of its expression. My research was designed on the premise that exploring a virtual sexual identity can provide a heretofore unavailable angle on sexual identity and desire that depend on the proliferation of certain types of media for both their expression and, in some ways, their existence.
Yaoi, for instance, precedes Second Life as a concept but *as an identity* can only be understood as a *virtual identity*, since its definition relies on a gap between sexed actual body (female) and sexed virtual body (male). A female-to-male transsexual or cross-dresser who is sexually attracted to men is not equivalent because for the transsexual, the original female body is no longer actual, and for the cross-dresser, the virtual male body is never fully embodied. This distinction points to the central concept of the dissertation overall: noncorporeal embodiment. I examined similar factors with respect to Gor and furries. The genders and sexual practices embodied by Gor exist in the real world, but the institutional support established by Gorean roleplayers does not. Furries sometimes dress their parts in real world contexts but cannot embody the identity as fully as is possible in a virtual context. In each of these examples, I used the concept of noncorporeal embodiment to illustrate the potential for sexual identities that individuals wholly embrace but that are not based on traditional notions of having a physical body. The dissertation addresses what gendered embodiment might mean to yaoi fans, furry fans, and Goreans, with particular attention paid to how the gap between actual and virtual embodiment contributes to, rather than detracts from, the experience of noncorporeal embodiment itself.

Boellstorff’s theme of *techne* as a gap between what a creator in a virtual world brings into being and what was there prior to the creation reemerges, this time with respect not simply to building usable virtual objects in a shared space but to developing an identity that can be embodied in—and can only be embodied in—a virtual space. My

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13 Much of the information provided in this section is based on the results of an interview with a Second Life resident who entered SL specifically to take part in yaoi culture.
theoretical approach to the topic of noncorporeally embodied identities thus drew strongly from Boellstorff’s discussion of creation and creativity as being significant aspects of living virtually. Methodologically, I combined sources such as articles and videos on these identities with a theoretical reading informed especially by Boellstorff. Related blog posts asked participants what types of activities (not necessarily sexual) they engage in within Second Life that have no equivalent in the actual world and addressed sexuality specifically while leaving definitions open, aiming to explore whether the participants experience a sense of embodiment in relation to sexuality inworld, whatever that means to them (flirting with other residents, observing sexually suggestive content, participating in sexual activities). The idea was, as research began, that sexuality infamously saturates the virtual world, in terms of visual content and its place in interaction between residents. An exploration of embodiment as a factor contributing to why this is the case, I expected, could inform the development of noncorporeal embodiment as a concept; similarly, I proposed that understanding the type of embodiment at play here as specifically noncorporeal would be useful in grasping virtual sexuality on the whole.

Researchers and observers of virtual worlds such as Mark Stephen Meadows (2008) have commented on the intense identification users often feel toward the avatars that represent them, using data from psychologists and evolutionary theorists to illustrate that such identification is normal and even to be expected, as (in Meadows’ view) technology has advanced too quickly for the more primitive parts of our brains to tell the difference between flesh-reality and virtual reality. “[P]eople assume what they see in
media is reality because evolution never demanded our brains do otherwise. Our media has out-evolved our brains, and so fiction registers, on a subconscious level, as fact” (2008:50). When this observation about media in general is transferred into a media form in which the corporeally embodied individual is not a passive viewer but an active participant with a second, noncorporeal body, the relationship is even stronger.

Theory and Methods: Violence

The Virtual Praxis of fall 2008 that I refer to earlier closed with a discussion on griefing and safety for women in Second Life. “Griefing,” broadly defined, is “participation in a virtual world with the intent of disrupting the experience of others” (Boellstorff 2008:185). The word is not specific to SL, probably coming into use around the year 2000 by users of the Ultima Online virtual world, and shifts in its meaning somewhat as do categories of harassment in the actual world. In the interview and blog components of my research I allowed participants to use their own definitions of what griefing is more specifically, since varying perceptions of what constitutes griefing are themselves of interest. However, I did follow Boellstorff, who draws from a paper presented at a gaming conference to recommend a definition in which the griefing is intentional and for the griefer’s (or griefers’) own amusement and in which the act interferes with other residents’ enjoyment of the game or world (Boellstorff 2008:188, citing Foo 2004).

Many interesting points were raised during the Praxis discussion that I explored more deeply for this dissertation, concerning specific forms of griefing that are, or appear

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to the victim to be, motivated or shaped by sex, sexuality, or gender, as well as modes of resistance to grieving. For example, one attendee and presenter talked about self defense courses for women taught inside SL, designed to address common forms of sexual harassment and gender-based grieving. Others recounted their experiences with griefers. The commenter who left the most significant impression on me, however, was an inworld educator who said she advises her female students against visiting sandboxes because there is a greater likelihood of being griefed there than in most places. Sandboxes in SL are locations with abundant open space and liberal rezzing permissions in place for visitors to build physical objects. While I share with this educator the informal impression that grieving is more common to public sandboxes than to many other locations, I was concerned about other implications of her comment. Why the female students in particular? Why caution them against going to sandboxes entirely, instead of discussing what to do if grieving occurs? How might such a warning affect a new resident’s impressions and experience of Second Life?

Many of the people with whom I have shared this anecdote note immediately the parallels between this educator’s cautions to her female students and the messages one might hear about where (in the actual world) it is safe or dangerous to walk, when, and with whom, typically delivered with attention to the hearer’s sex, race, perceived sexual orientation, and other characteristics. Beliefs about how women should conduct themselves in order to secure their own safety relate to moralistic perceptions of women’s

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To “rez,” short for “resolve,” related to “resolution,” is to place or create a prim object inworld unattached to the avatar, prims—or primitives—being the “building blocks” of everything in SL except for avatars and land. Ownership of land is priced by Linden Lab according to size and how many prims are permitted to be rezzed in that location, so owners are able to allow visitors to rez or prohibit visitors from rezzing objects according to their needs.
proper social behavior and, ultimately, to cultures of victim blame and self-blame particularly in cases of rape (e.g., Ahrens 2006:269-70). Although such warnings in the corporeal world are often inflected by race, class, and gender-based stereotypes, they nonetheless have a core of practicality, in that physical violence can and does sometimes occur. Griefing can and does sometimes occur, as well, but the circumstances that position some parties as victims and others as perpetrators are not the same, nor are the physical consequences of a grieving incident identical to those of a corporeally experienced act of violence.

In Chapter 4, I examine grieving through a gendered lens, taking particular note of whether and to what extent discourses such as the one the educator invoked and others drawn from (or similar to) actual world discourses on gender and violence are visible in the virtual world. A consideration of embodiment is part of many approaches, both feminist and non-feminist, in both formal theory and casual regard, to understanding gendered violence: sizes, sexes, and types of bodily harm influence victims’, perpetrators’ and third parties’ perceptions of various aspects of an incident of violence, along with numerous other factors. Even forms of emotional and mental abuse in the corporeal world can be viewed in relation to embodiment. For instance, “physical intimidation” appears in some versions of the Power and Control Wheel utilized by many domestic violence victim advocates to illustrate how an embodied presence can imply a physical threat without one actually being voiced. This chapter of the dissertation

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16 One such wheel can be found here: [http://www.uic.edu/depts/owa/power_control-wheel_clip_image001.jpg](http://www.uic.edu/depts/owa/power_control-wheel_clip_image001.jpg) (Accessed 17 September 2010). The “Using Intimidation” piece of the pie includes the example, “Making her afraid by using looks, actions, gestures.”
considers how the degree of comfort with one’s virtual body affects one’s ability to respond to it, as well as how acts of griefing are gendered or sexualized.

Some early feminist theories of rape took an embodied view, with prominent writers such as Susan Brownmiller attributing the potentiality of rape to the physical construction of women’s and men’s bodies, which she describes as “[m]an’s structural capacity to rape and woman’s corresponding structural vulnerability” (Brownmiller 1975:13). Although this statement is easy to trouble by expanding the definition of rape to a broader range of penetrable orifices and penetrating implements beyond the vagina and penis to which Brownmiller refers (14), the categorical perception of men as potential predators and women as potential victims is more generally and deeply ingrained in many gender discourses. In research based on conversation analysis, Jocelyn Hollander (2001) identifies these divergent discourses of masculinity and femininity and addresses how placing them in embodied terms naturalizes them and makes them invisible (84-5). Simultaneously, the discourses themselves are embodied by women and men, so that “women’s lack of strength relative to men is not simply the result of different physiology but of gender expectations that valorize feminine delicacy and thinness and discourage athletic ability, while men’s greater strength and agility are due, in part, to more extensive physical training” (85). The observation that male humans are, on average, larger than female humans, on average, is thus not neutral, when it is seen to imply that being smaller and weaker than most men is what makes a woman a “normal” woman.

One of the components that everyone in Second Life needs to exist as an avatar is
a shape. Residents can create or buy a shape of their choosing, and various types of clothing and attachments can provide the avatar with almost any desired look, but there are certain technical limitations determining the foundational shape’s parameters. Shapes have a gender, either male or female. The shape can be edited by adjusting numerical sliders that change nearly eighty facial and bodily dimensions. It is possible to create gender ambiguity with either a “male” or “female” shape, but a few dimensions are gender exclusive (e.g., “package” for male avatars and “breast buoyancy” for female avatars), and some slider ranges differ. Not counting attachments that increase height or make parts of a shape invisible, a female avatar can range from 4’9” to 8’2” and a male avatar, from 5’0” to 8’6”. On the one hand, these ranges provide far more overlap than they do dichotomous division; on the other hand, it seems to me that if the difference of three to four inches were inconsequential, it would not be necessary to build them into the system’s controls.

Significantly, however, these dimensional limitations do not translate into any difference in physical ability from avatar to avatar. They are strictly aesthetic. The 4’9” avatar and the 8’6” avatar could meet in a boxing ring, on a battlefield, or even in a “forced sex” sim and, in terms of what the bodies are capable of doing, would be meeting on equal footing. In the boxing example, the outcome of a bout might be

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17 The four essential components are shape, skin, hair (including a “bald base” option), and eyes. It is not possible to remove any of these four body parts from an avatar but only to replace them with different ones. 18 I obtained these numbers by entering Edit Appearance mode with a default avatar and setting all of the sliders first to their smallest vertical settings and then to their largest, with the radio button ticked to each gender in turn. 19 “Rape” fantasies may be played out in Second Life, and as long as 1) both (or all) avatars are constructed to look like adults; 2) it is not in a PG-rated sim; and 3) it is either in private or on an adult sim where age verification is required, then it is acceptable by Linden Lab’s standards. The roleplay of such scenes is not the same as a nonconsensual grieving incident.
influenced by the competitors’ skill and familiarity with the controls and the quality of their computer hardware and internet connections, but not by the size or gender of their avatars. On a sexual roleplay sim, in which an avatar’s appearance might be taken as a cue to others as to what role the avatar is playing, gender and size can communicate contextual meaning, but ultimately, weaknesses are performed within the setting, not determined by the avatar’s physical construction. There is some (contested) evidence that female avatars experience griefing more often than male avatars, and that the griefing is more likely to involve a sexual component (Cremorne 2010). Nonetheless, it is clear that

1) there is nothing essential to a female avatar to disadvantage it more than a male avatar in a griefing incident; 2) being sexually griefed could be lessened—and being sexually griefed as a female avatar can be avoided—by changing the avatar’s gender; and 3) unlike actual world incidents of violence, a virtual world incident can usually be escaped quickly and without difficulty.

The educator’s comments at the Praxis are not necessarily representative of feminist approaches to gender and griefing in Second Life; they are, however, evidence that such an outlook exists and, given that I was the only person in the discussion who questioned her remark vocally, may not be especially controversial within the context in which it was made. The topic of gendered violence in Second Life is a good opportunity for seeing how feminist theory may still be attached to essentialist assumptions that it

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20 One could argue, of course, that if a woman is most comfortable using a female avatar, she should not have to use a male one in order to feel safe, and that the visual presence of women in Second Life should not be compromised by the threat of violence. I present the gender change option, however, solely as an alternative to avoiding locations entirely. Location avoidance also results in the user of the female avatar compromising her inworld experience and reducing female visibility and presence while also eliminating opportunities for participation in some of Second Life’s everyday activities.
takes a context exceedingly different from traditional research in the actual world to make visible. It is not that virtual worlds are so postmodern that actual world physical sex or social constructions of gender are irrelevant, or that users of virtual worlds have—or even can have—an unproblematic approach to sex and gender. For my research, I proposed that experiences of embodiment in virtual worlds would differ from experiences of embodiment in the actual world in ways that can inform feminist theory by calling attention to the understandings, beliefs, and assumptions underlying theories of gender, violence, and embodiment that make those differences visible.

For this focus of the dissertation, I introduced questions to the blog participants aimed at generating a discussion of perceptions of gender and griefing, including but not limited to: what individuals’ experiences with griefing have been (if any) and what/how they have learned to combat, avoid, or minimize their experience of griefing inworld. I supplemented with interviews with Second Life residents who have had comparatively extensive experience in dealing with griefers and who engage in forms of resistance, whether by teaching self-defense to other residents or by developing familiarity with the technological tools available to thwart or combat griefers directly.

Ann J. Cahill (2001) holds that rape is an embodied experience in the sense that the social phenomenon of rape influences the way that women and men embody femininity and masculinity. Women, that is to say, are codified as potential victims; though the physical experience of rape undoubtedly carries its own lasting effects, it is enough simply to be taught that one can be raped to shape gendered conduct and comportment. Her recommendations for change thus center on women’s self-defense,
which she sees as a means of “recodification of the female body” (207). When Cahill argues for viewing rape as an “embodied experience” (109-42), both parts of the phrase are necessary for a complete understanding of her concept: it is equally important to retain the body as the site of rape (e.g., a gendered, raced body) as it is to recognize the act as one experienced subjectively, by an individual who is inseparable, before as well as after the incident, socially and psychologically, from that body. Harm that takes place in a virtual world such as Second Life would necessarily be fundamentally psychological (in the sense that it is not physical), but this dissertation considers the extent to which victim/survivors of grieving also experience violence as embodied, using the concept of noncorporeal embodiment as an analytical tool.

Concluding Discussion

The dissertation concludes with a discussion of which of these goals came to fruition and which would, rather, best be explored through future research. Some of my research methods and theoretical frameworks evolved over the course of the research, and I address how this affected how the conclusions might be both understood and built upon. In addition, there are a number of areas where developing the concept of noncorporeal embodiment as a means of understanding how identities and communities are established in virtual worlds can offer future feminist theorists counterpoints and new ways of examining embodiment. I identify some of these, both for the purpose of reviewing older feminist theories in light of this newer concept and for the purpose of assisting future work that might benefit from the tools and ideas that I present in this work.
Chapter 2: Virtual Identity: A Product of Technology and Community

One of the ways in which users gain a sense of noncorporeal embodiment in the virtual world is through the process of developing their avatars, and this process is shaped by the communities in which users are involved. Just as in real life, communities and subcultures exist in Second Life that develop particular looks and styles of embodiment, though some differences exist because of the greater variability available in a virtual context. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Second Life residents develop a sense of embodied identity both through navigating the technical tools that connect the real life user to the Second Life avatar and through involvement in communities and subcultures. I draw upon theories that engage, challenge, or re-imagine constructions of human/machine dichotomies and theories of performativity to provide one way of understanding how the process of developing a sense of noncorporeal embodiment works and to illustrate how the process contributes to bodies of feminist theory.

Research Methods

Research methods for this chapter include engagement with Second Life residents, as well as written material produced by them that conveys different aspects of how they understand or experience their identities or sense of embodiment. Responses on the Virtually Engendered blog and from interview participants come into use in this as in all other chapters of this work. In addition, I review employment and real estate classified
ads posted inworld\textsuperscript{21} and consider how gender is constructed for these jobs and locations. I analyze group profiles and the literature distributed at and associated with Second Life locations that have a stake in maintaining a particular kind of gendered community. Much discourse about Second Life, produced by Second Life residents communicating in the names of their Second Life avatars, takes place on the Internet outside of the Second Life platform as well.

\textbf{Theoretical Bases}

Theoretically, this chapter draws from three main areas toward the goal of illustrating noncorporeal embodiment and how this concept holds significance for feminist theory: the rhizome, the relationship between human and technology, and gender performativity. At the foundation of the noncorporeal embodiment model is the concept of the rhizome, as the term is used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The rhizome allows for a model to have a recognizable and cohesive core that is nonetheless interconnected with other conceptually discrete entities. Interlaced with conceptualizing this form of embodiment as rhizomatic is a discussion of how noncorporeal embodiment provides an exceptional illustration of the blurring of boundaries between human and machine in the twenty-first century. I draw from Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1990) while building on Tom Boellstorff’s theory of \textit{techne}, a perspective centered on “\textit{homo cyber},” or the “human online, the virtual human” (2008:25). Also

\textsuperscript{21} “Inworld” is defined in Second Life’s wiki as “being connected to the Second Life servers and present in the Second Life world (also: online), anything that takes place within the virtual environment of Second Life” (http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Inworld). Although the word, in common usage, no longer refers exclusively to Second Life but may be applied to participation in any virtual world that is not a game, its use in connection to Second Life is the earliest I have been able to trace. Significantly, the word contrasts with an older term, “in-game,” which is sometimes still used by Second Life residents whose original points of reference were massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs).
closely linked with the first two areas of theory is the concept of performativity in the
development and physical expression of virtual gender. If, as I seek to show,
oncorporeal embodiment develops from the process of learning the technologies
involved in a given virtual platform, it is simultaneously enacted by participants who
learn the cues for how to express themselves—including how to perform gender in this
context—from one another and build these performances into their virtual embodiments.
I follow Internet researchers like Angela Thomas (2007) in applying Judith Butler’s
approach to gender performativity to the use of avatars in virtual space.

The Technological Biology of Noncorporeal Embodiment

Identifying the different components of what would ultimately constitute virtual or noncorporeal embodiment, or an online sense of selfhood in a graphic virtual environment, leads into conceptualizations of mind and body, an area of thought with which feminist theorists have long grappled. Mindy/body dualism is visible in many historical traditions, and authors like Letitia Meynell (2009) have offered perspectives on how and when dualistic discourses have shaped understandings of gender, race, and disability and justified overt and implicit structures of inequality. Feminist theorists of embodiment have raised challenges to mind/body dualistic discourses for their tendency to naturalize physical “difference” of women, racialized minorities, and the disabled and oppose it to the rationality of those (i.e., able-bodied white men) who are not constructed in these discourses to be significantly bound by their physical being (Meynell 2009:5).

The concept of noncorporeal embodiment complicates thinking about mind/body dualism and feminist theorists’ management of and responses to dualistic discourses. At
times while trying to explain the subject, I find myself lapsing into dualistic models wherein the user at the computer functions as a brain behind the avatar-puppet in the virtual world, who moves at the user’s whim and speaks only the words put into her mouth. And no part of this description is actually untrue: the avatar cannot function without a human being at the controls unless it is programmed (also by a human) to do so. It is only a partial truth, however, a shorthand truth, and is unhelpful in ultimately understanding what I mean by “noncorporeal embodiment.” More than the control of an avatar is necessary for a sense of embodiment to develop on the part of the user.

A model of embodiment that better encapsulates the kernel of noncorporeal embodiment is that of Donna Haraway’s cyborg: a technologically adapted and adaptable entity that is inseparable, at key points, from the technology that it uses. Like the cyborg, the noncorporeally embodied individual ruptures the “boundaries between organisms and machines and between the physical world and immaterial things”; the avatar becomes “a way to grapple with what it means to be a conscious, embodied subject in an environment structured by techno-scientific practices that challenge basic and widely-shared notions of what it means to be human” (Stryker and Whittle 2006:103). I do not necessarily see all aspects of Haraway’s cyborg applying directly to the substance of the avatar; for instance, I am not ready to identify Second Life or any other space, actual or

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22 Haraway identifies a human/animal boundary rupture alongside the organism/machine and physical/immaterial ones, and this rupture is highly visible in Second Life and other virtual worlds with regard to many subcultures that blend human and animal forms in various ways. “Nekos” and other hybrids, “furries,” “tinies,” and complete animal avatars collectively establish a spectrum of humanity-animality that challenges a more dichotomous division of humanity/animality. Nonetheless, I don’t believe this boundary rupture is as potent as the other two in illustrating the ways in which the cyborg model presages and influences my proposed concept of noncorporeal embodiment, though it may be relevant to some users’ sense of virtual embodiment.
virtual, as “post-gender,” whereas Haraway refers to the cyborg as “a creature in a post-gender world” (2006:104). Nonetheless, some elements of Haraway’s original 1983 work, like the ones described above, seem prescient in their application to the avatar, two decades before it became an accessible form of personal virtual representation to non-gaming populations with internet access. While the cyborg model identifies a coming-together of different biological and technological components and situates the avatar within a greater context of cyborg being that can include everything from one person’s physical reliance on a pacemaker to another’s social reliance on portable communications technologies like cellular phones, I find Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome useful for explaining how these components relate to one another.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari propose a rhizomatic model for theory formation as an alternative to viewing knowledge and history as linear, binary, or causal in their character. They use the term “assemblage” to identify collections of concepts, phenomena, and objects of study, a term that emphasizes these collections’ multiplicities and interconnectedness. A topic is never solitary to Deleuze and Guattari but may always potentially affect, be affected by, or be in communication with other factors, as the components of a biological rhizome interconnect with one another. I apply this model to my discussion of noncorporeal embodiment to provide a basis for understanding the relationships among the human user, the graphically rendered avatar, and all of the mediating elements that establish a meaningful connection between them, such as computer hardware, viewer software, a resident’s social context and prior internet or virtual worlds experience, and even Linden Lab’s Terms of Service. In relation to the
avatar, the user is the component with agency, who initiates the actions that establish a relationship among the other components, but all of the parts are necessary for an assemblage to take shape and to become recognizable as a noncorporeally embodied resident of a virtual world.

The software one uses to enter and function in a virtual world is perhaps less visible as a part of the assemblage of noncorporeal embodiment than the human and avatar bodies, but events that took place in 2010 in Second Life can illustrate how something that most users probably take for granted can have a significant impact on one’s embodied experience of the world. This example also shows how a mind/body dualistic understanding of the relationship between the user and the avatar is insufficient toward grasping the complex ways in which a sense of embodiment may be established.

In February 2010, Linden Lab released a brand new, completely refurbished Second Life viewer—the application residents download and open in order to enter Second Life, also sometimes called a “client” —called Second Life Viewer 2.0, that created ripples in many long-time SL residents’ sense of embodiment. New viewer releases were and continue to be routine, usually for fixing bugs and introducing new features. The release of Viewer 2, however, was meant to be a first step in moving virtual worlds toward greater compatibility with the World Wide Web and thus more mainstream appeal (Ashby 2010; Driver 2010; Korolov 2010; Writer 2010). Redesigning

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23 A Beta version of Viewer 2 was released February 23. The official release came March 31.
24 Some third party “viewers” are designed for text-only participation in Second Life, making “client” a more accurate term. Text-only clients like Metabolt are less demanding on a user’s computer resources, so they are sometimes useful when the individual only wants to log in and chat with friends. Their avatar is logged into the world, and they can accept teleport offers from other people to move their avatar from one spot to another, but they cannot move around freely of their own accord or view any graphical material.
the graphical user interface (UI) to resemble a web browser was meant to make the
viewer more new-user-friendly, while the introduction of “shared media” (Figure 1),
which would allow residents inworld to view and manipulate web-based media, would
permit businesses and educators to conduct a broader range of tasks in a shared space.
Many commentators extolled these advances, as crossing the threshold between media
would “radically transform the virtual world, its culture, its ability to integrate with the
wider digital landscape, and its ability to attract new users” (Writer 2010).

Figure 1. Viewer 2 and its successor viewers allow web pages to be viewed inworld.

For all the exciting new technology Viewer 2 promised, however, its rollout was
not unanimously welcomed by Second Life’s existing user base. The primary complaint
among detractors—and there were many—concerned the new UI. While it was widely
agreed that it would be easier for new users to grasp (Ashby 2010; Driver 2010), it proved unpopular for many seasoned residents. Some objections to the change in UI noted a loss of function due to parts of the UI itself becoming more intrusive and less customizable. Other criticisms held that the means of accomplishing certain tasks had become harder or less intuitive for new and old residents alike, like “trying to teach people to turn off their music by hitting a ‘play’ button” (McCann 2010). A consistent theme to the objections, whether overt or underlying, was that trying to learn a new graphical UI after building months or years of experience using the UI that had been in place since 2003 (Allen and Vatza 2010) was challenging. Of course, different people had different ways of describing the challenge: one referred to it as “the opportunity to fumble around with our well-worn ruts erased” (McCann 2010), while another called it “a jarring, slap-in-the-face experience at first” akin to “throwing boiling water onto a frozen windshield” (Blackthorne 2010).

Regardless of how one felt about the new UI, Viewer 2 obligated existing residents to figuratively rewire their brains’ connections to Second Life if they were to learn to use the new technological features. Importantly, many chose to avoid the new viewer entirely, opting instead either to retain Linden Lab’s Viewer 1.23, which was the last internal update to the old UI, or to seek out a “third party viewer” (TPV) created by software developers not affiliated with Linden Lab. In fact, in the results of a web poll conducted by blogger Daniel Voyager more than nine months after Viewer 2 was first launched, only one out of four respondents indicated that they preferred to connect to
Second Life with Viewer 2 or one using the same UI, though it is Linden Lab’s default download option and thus the first Second Life client that most new residents now learn.

With regard to the topic of noncorporeal embodiment, the significance of Viewer 2’s release is how the mixed reactions that followed point to a key piece of the noncorporeal embodiment assemblage. I suggest that the viewer that a given resident uses to log in to Second Life and her comfort level and familiarity with its controls can affect the resident’s overall experience in the virtual world and with using an avatar to function within it. The process of learning how the viewer mediates between the biological body sitting at the keyboard and the avatar body whose movements, appearance, and communication provide the actual person with a virtual existence is a significant part of becoming virtually embodied. Although all viewers provide access to an account’s Inventory, the storage area that contains (among other things) all the clothing and body parts one might use to develop an avatar’s physical appearance, residents engage with more factors than physical appearance alone while becoming virtually embodied.

The entry point for new residents has changed over time, but when I began in Second Life, new residents would log in for the first time and arrive on Orientation Island, where a series of simple tutorials would assist them in learning controls for

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25 The poll was posted 3 November 2010. As of 16 November 2010, 11 respondents favor the official Viewer 2 release, 8 favor a new Viewer 2 Beta, and 2 prefer Kirsten’s Viewer, a TPV based on Viewer 2’s UI, out of a total of 84 respondents. Most other TPVs, including the highest-ranking viewer in the poll, Phoenix Viewer, have based their Uls on the older 1.23 release. The poll was never closed, but the release of later viewer versions not covered by the poll makes more recent results less reliable. It can be found here: http://danielvoyagerblog.wordpress.com/2010/11/03/poll-which-is-your-favourite-sl-viewer-for-november-2010/
moving around, speaking in text, and other basic tasks. Completing these tutorials may be understood as the first step new residents make in becoming virtually embodied, where noncorporeal embodiment is best understood as a rhizomatic assemblage, a system of interconnected parts that exist in nonlinear relations with one another. The tasks involved are the sort that most users will be able to perform smoothly and without thinking over time, but they need to be learned. The learning, moreover, takes place in an embodied manner that affects both actual and virtual bodies. As with any other software application, greater familiarity with menus, windows, and shortcuts corresponds to swifter eye and finger movements while performing the desired functions, an everyday embodiment of physical information. I suggest that when the software application in question links the user to another body, a virtual and noncorporeal one that is dependent on the corporeal body for all of its functions, the process of embodiment takes on additional dimensions.

A user’s sense of noncorporeal embodiment hinges on the development of the avatar, and so the user-avatar connection becomes the most visible; it is the one I consistently return to in this work as well. But the focus on how the user and avatar affect one another is a matter of emphasis, not exclusion. As I attempt to explain above, the software and its facility of use can be a factor in whether one functions smoothly as an avatar or whether one performs basic embodied tasks clumsily, hesitantly, or otherwise.

26 By early 2012, it had changed to Welcome Island, which used a similar principle but in a smaller space than I remember from my first day. By spring of 2012, the tutorial area has been replaced by “Destination Island,” which contains only portals to different parts of the grid to set new residents out exploring without being taught preliminary skills. There are also tutorial areas built by existing residents, but these are not necessarily easy for new residents to find. Thanks for the information on Destination Island go to a friend who created a new account and took pictures of the login area.
inefficiently; consequently, it can have an influence on all areas of inworld experience and contribute to whether one spends more time enjoying the virtual world or simply trying to be competent. Aspects of the Second Life user experience that take shape outside of the visible, physical avatar body can be understood as embodied through metaphors of “hygiene” and “health.”

Mark Stephen Meadows refers to avatar maintenance and inventory management as “avatar hygiene” (2008:90), and I consider this a useful metaphor for thinking about not only what goes into who and what an avatar is but for understanding various aspects of actual embodied being as well. The direct application of the specific word “hygiene” is arguable, but I would like to discuss the implications of applying a bodily oriented metaphor not to the avatar’s physical self but to what is essentially a folder. The inventory contains subfolders for holding and organizing the avatar’s “assets,” the Second Life word for anything at all an avatar can possess. Assets include, to start with, body parts and clothing that constitute an avatar’s physical appearance as well as objects one might attach to one’s body (e.g., vehicles, pets that sit on the shoulder or hover nearby) and animations that one might use to override the system’s default set of “walks,” “stands,” “sits,” etc. I suggest that developing a sense of embodiment as an avatar is much more than merely accumulating and using the contents of one’s inventory to customize and personalize appearance, however.

In some respects, embodiment may have very little to do with appearance. Assets, for instance, also include gestures, which are short combinations of text, sound, and/or animations that an avatar might use to communicate a particular compartmentalized
thought or expression; some people use gestures frequently and others, not at all, but those who use them are engaging in a form of communication specific to avatar embodiment. Intangible assets like calling cards, landmarks, and notecards will never be visible on an avatar or in the content a user creates but are nonetheless part of what might be understood as an avatar’s internal makeup. Textures, sound files, and objects can be used in the creation of inworld content; those who design and create might do it for fun, for art, for relaxation, for profit, for the consumption of others, or simply to kill time, but from the fingers that type or mouse the intention to the selection of inventoried materials to the physical and visual manipulation of the parts inworld by an animated entity that lifts its arm and transmits a beam of particles toward whatever she or he is building or modifying, the process is embodied. All of the assets a specific avatar has access to are housed in that avatar’s inventory, the maintenance of which Meadows terms “hygienic” practice:

By private hygiene, I mean things done out of personal interest involving convenience, efficiency, and the ability to communicate, such as sorting, managing, and categorizing possessions. You have to make sure you know where things are, keep them organized and clear, maintain keyboard shortcuts and macros for particular functions, and properly install recent upgrades—looking after your avatar’s functionality. (Meadows 2008:90)

Meadows thus brings several aspects of avatar “functionality” into a metaphor—the hygiene metaphor—that specifically evokes embodiment.

Similarly, a popular third party viewer, Firestorm, has a menu category called

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27 Calling cards are copies of others’ profiles that get saved to the inventory when one avatar accepts a “friendship” offer from another; landmarks signify locations across the grid and provide an easy way to travel from one to another; notecards are, as the name implies, documents of a sort, used for conveying or recording many kinds of information. Landmarks and notecards can technically be included in inworld content in a way that will allow them to be distributed to other residents by a scripted object, but they do not, for instance, alter the appearance or experience of the world itself.
“Avatar Health” (Figure 2) that includes four operations that assist a user in managing the avatar and its functions inworld. The first of those, “Stop Avatar Animations,” can be used if the avatar body is being animated by another source and the animation is no longer desired but the expected means of stopping the animations are not responding.

Figure 2. Avatar Health submenu in Firestorm.

“Force Appearance Update” corresponds with a process known in other viewers as “rebaking,” and it is used when an avatar’s textures (the colors and shadings that compose the skin and some of the clothing) have failed to load completely and may appear blurry or gray; it is comparable to refreshing a webpage that has gotten hung up.

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28 The phrase “Avatar Health” has an additional existing meaning. When one’s avatar enters a damage-enabled area, a health meter appears at the top of the screen. While in this location, the avatar is vulnerable to bodily threats that may deplete health or cause temporary avatar death. The health meter is used mainly in roleplay environments, especially combat sims. Firestorm’s use of “Avatar Health” is metaphoric, while this use of the term emphasizes the avatar body as realistically embodied and vulnerable.
While trying to load, “Show Render Draw Weight for Avatars” displays a number above one’s avatar’s head and those of others that provides a very rough estimate of the graphical demand that the avatar places on viewers that attempt to render it when it comes into camera range. The “Lag Meter” can be displayed if one is experiencing system-related pauses or inhibitions on movement, text speech, and other actions and one wishes to determine in what part of the system the problem exists. Finally, “Recreate LSL Bridge” refers to an attachment that the viewer’s users wear on their avatars to enhance some of the viewer’s features; the recreate option in the menu allows an easy way for the user to rebuild the bridge when it is not functioning correctly.

All of these tools except for the last exist in all Second Life viewers (the bridge is specific to Firestorm and its older sibling viewer, Phoenix), but they normally appear in very different menus from one another. The “Avatar Health” menu is novel, and the particular set of tools that it categorizes together illustrates another way in which avatar embodiment can be understood as extending beyond what the avatar looks like and into both internal and even external functions. Perceiving these items as relating to avatar health engages a huge range of other components into a rhizomatic construct. Implicated in avatar health by this menu are: the computer server generating the sim where the avatar is currently located, the internet connection that allows the user to remain online and inworld, the client (viewer), objects in the virtual space that animate the avatar, an attachment that connects the avatar inworld with viewer functions, and even other avatars whose presence affects the performance of one’s own client. I can’t say whether or not a significant number of users think of this assortment of virtual and actual components as
part of their avatars’ bodies, but the creation of this menu is evidence that it is possible to do so.

The comparisons of inventory maintenance and the variety of elements affecting avatar use with hygiene or health is not direct; there is no act of inventory maintenance that can be described as being “like” brushing one’s teeth, and there is no inventory dentist. In a rough sense, maintaining an organized inventory can relate to being easily able to find and use the assets most central to one’s own avatar identity, but it is possible to have a large and messy inventory and still be able to function perfectly well inworld. What I like about Meadows’s use of the term, however, is that it specifically invokes a body-oriented metaphor to address an aspect of avatar being with no immediately apparent relation to physical embodiment, and yet that relation becomes visible with only a little examination. The inventory holds assets that might be critical to one’s social, economic, and creative being, all of which I would suggest can constitute a sense of one’s virtual identity, and to the extent that this identity is realized through an avatar that takes physical form inworld, it is also noncorporeally embodied. Similarly, the tools compiled by the Firestorm developers under the heading of “Avatar Health” do not necessarily reflect a consensus among the general Second Life populace about how to understand avatar embodiment, but I am interested in the fact that this model of “health” would be constructed and installed in a viewer.

Noncorporeal embodiment, as I develop the concept here, is dependent on the avatar as a visual representation of the user but extends well beyond that to point to a variety of components, both server-side and client-side, that contribute to this sense of
embodiment. Another factor I would like to address here is the dynamic side of developing a sense of avatar embodiment: Tom Boellstorff’s concept of techne. The mechanisms provided to the avatar and its user for general functioning within Second Life—viewer tools and inventory assets—are available to all, or to all who use a specific viewer. Techne is the active and interactive process of using the tools available, specifically in creative and productive ways. Summarized in Second Life’s longtime marketing slogan, “Your world, your imagination,” the ability to create and own the rights to inworld assets is a privilege granted to Second Life residents setting this space apart from any commercial virtual world that came before it (Au 2008:128) and setting a precedent for smaller grids that have developed since. That residents have the capacity to build also gave rise to Second Life as “a resident-built environment organized around the creating and selling of objects. Through building, Second Life was constituted as a commodity economy, with consequences for understandings of selfhood and society” (Boellstorff 2008:97).

Some of the consequences Boellstorff refers to are visible in the process of creating an avatar. Upon opening a Second Life account, one selects a starter avatar from a range of options. Customizing an avatar involves engaging with Second Life’s creation process, which is enmeshed with a creation culture. Any change to a default avatar means acquiring and using assets through buying, building, or finding them. Creating inworld content, for oneself or others, is itself not necessarily a completely solitary process, as components like textures, templates, and sculpt maps may be

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29 The available starter avatars change periodically, but there are usually about ten to twelve to choose from, varying in gender, race, and style.
purchased from others for use in one’s own builds. If a user primarily constructs her avatar by buying or finding clothing and body parts (as most do), she becomes interconnected with a vast network of creators, one of whom made the skin, another the eyes, and several others the different articles of clothing the person is wearing on a given day. Boellstorff’s concept of techne “refers to art or craft, to human action that engages with the world and thereby results in a different world” (55). Granting virtual entities the ability to create, to engage in techne, contributes to a type of virtual being in which the potential directions for realizing different forms and meanings of embodiment are incalculable, while those who engage in the process, whether as builders or as compilers of built creations, are part of an overall self-perpetuating culture weaving together creativity, crafting, identity formation, community building, and economic trade.

Constructing Virtual Gender Identity – Community

Any Second Life resident can use a female- or male-bodied avatar at will, perhaps maintaining more than one account and using them to construct avatars of different sexes or acquiring the body parts necessary for a single account to switch sexes if desired. When asked how they chose their avatars’ gender, many of the contributors to the blog associated with this project—more than half of those who responded to this question—stated that they use a primary avatar that corresponds to their real life sex but

30 “Build” is used as a noun here to refer to a specific creation.
31 Second Life not only has a creation culture but, for many, a freebie culture visible, for instance, at fashion blogs like Free*Style (http://slfreestyle.blogspot.com/) and Fabulously Free (http://fabfree.wordpress.com/). Not everyone invests real life money into the world, so someone with no inworld income but with a concern for outfitting her avatar attractively may engage in activities like hunts, Midnight Mania board slapping, Lucky Chair stalking, and other opportunities to acquire free items. Rather than explain what all of these terms mean, I wish only to identify them as examples of ways that store owners make promotional items available that attract paying customers but also allow freebie hunters to participate in Second Life’s commodity/creation culture.
have an “alt” (alternate account) of the other gender that they created out of curiosity, for fun, or to avoid being sexually propositioned, but that they seldom use. Only one person wrote that she sometimes changes her primary avatar’s gender to male but generally uses the male form for fitting the male clothing she makes and sells and does not typically use it in social contexts. My participant observations support these patterns: that it is more common for avatars to be used either as female or as male than to alternate regularly. There are exceptions, but they are generally performed as exceptions, with friends “in the know” that the gendered form being taken is not that avatar’s “real” one (where “real” does not necessarily equate with “actual”), i.e., the one that is normally associated with that avatar’s identity.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the ease with which physical gender can be manipulated, some spaces in Second Life are constructed as female-only or male-only or designate roles for their male and female participants. Some lesbian and gay clubs are open to guests of the non-targeted gender, but others delineate themselves as gender-specific. Residential areas may also be single-sex; for instance, one classified ad listed under “Property Rental” in Second Life’s internal search system reads, “GORGEOUS HOUSES FOR RENT – ALL GIRLS SIM! Serendipity Pointe features a warm, suburban residential feel on a high-performance Class 5 SIM designed for women-only with serene escape from mainstream Second Life in mind.” An ad in the “Employment” section provides an example of a space designating the roles of staff and guests in a gendered fashion: “CZARS (LADIES ONLY) – HIRING MALE DANCERS, HOSTESSES, DJ’S,” the ad’s title reads. The body continues, “We are not just looking for your average
male dancer, we are looking for someone who can really emote in a sensual and seductive manner! We are also looking for energetic and friendly ladies with a great personality, who know how to get a party started!” This strip club hires male-bodied strippers and female-bodied event hosts\footnote{Event hosting is a Second Life job that quickly becomes familiar and recognizable to many residents. At a dance club, the job responsibilities involve greeting newly arriving guests, running contests, and maintaining a social atmosphere during the event; at other types of venues the responsibilities would vary according to the events held. Rymaszewski (2008:287) also discusses event hosting as a basic form of skilled labor in Second Life, the skills being social and strongly related to familiarity with Second Life norms and the subcultures in which one hosts. In the case of the male strip club in the ad, the hostess’s job would be to socialize with the female guests and encourage them to tip the male dancers.} to entertain its female-bodied clientele. If events are held in text (and not voice) at this location, then it is possible that interested job candidates are not asked about their real life sex. What will matter in constructing this particular form of entertainment is that male-embodied avatars are used to titillate clients who respond to them via female-embodied avatars.

An important aspect of constructing a space in gendered terms in this way is that specific types of masculinity and femininity or maleness and femaleness develop. At Serendipity Pointe, the women-only space is described as “serene” and is contrasted with “mainstream” locations. At Czars, male dancers perform as objects of female sexual interest, while female avatars fill the roles of sexual consumers and (in the case of the hostess) suppliers. In 2008, I conducted an analysis of the materials distributed to potential and new members of a women-only relaxation park that I call in this work The Springs. At one time open to the public, the park’s founders eventually decided to recreate it as a private, gender-restricted park where all interested women would need to meet with a manager before receiving group membership. The notecard distributed to all new members in 2008 reads, “Originally, [The Springs] were open to the public, but
every man without exception was rude, crude, and stupid, so I closed [The Springs] to men. Closing the group was only meant to exclude people who weren't respectful and sensitive.\textsuperscript{33}

A few things struck me about the notecard, the most obvious being the extreme characterization; it is hard to imagine that “every man without exception” behaved in the same manner. Without an alternative perspective for comparison, however, it is necessary to take the characterization at face value, at least as one person’s impression of the history. Perhaps the park did not attract any nice or respectful men because any who came saw no place for themselves there, meaning the only ones who stuck around did so

\textsuperscript{33} The card is dated 15 June 2008, and “I” refers to the Park founder, who, aside from still owning the sim, is no longer actively involved in the Park’s affairs (personal communication).
in order to harass. Or perhaps—and this was the crux of my earlier project—the characterization of men as “rude, crude, and stupid” is what, in a virtual context where apparent gender can be changed at will, actually defined men as men. Taken in reverse, this description functions as an overt construction of gender, where maleness is not so much the basis for a set of traits as the gender that is produced when that set of traits is present. To the extent that gender is constructed dichotomously throughout the park’s literature, femaleness as the only visible alternative to maleness in this context may not have an equally restrictive set of defining points, but it cannot be reduced to rudeness, crudeness, and stupidity. Within this construction, a female-embodied avatar that exhibits these traits might be suspected of being a man, while a real life man could achieve virtual femaleness in this space simply by adopting a female form and not expressing those characteristics.

The significance here for virtual world research is that if a similar set of circumstances were applied to a space in the actual world—a female-positive but open space closes its doors to men and non-members due to (an interpretation of) men’s behavior—some of this analysis would be less intuitive but, importantly, still somewhat valid. For example, the construction of maleness and femaleness implied by the notecard can result in a literal transformation of bodies on the avatar level not so easily attained by actual bodies. A real life man can choose to be respectful, but no amount of respectfulness will turn him into a biological woman. The stark assignment of specific traits to members of the respective genders, however, points to another part of how the

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34 And although it can probably go without saying, it is unlikely that a real life man would undergo the complications of sex reassignment simply in order to gain access to a specific private space.
social construction of gender can have embodied results of a different kind, through performativity.

The park’s historical record provides members with a template for performing its own version of femaleness, but whether that ideal is attained by all park members is a more subjective matter. On the topic of the park’s history, I interviewed Derya, who is currently the park’s most active event planner. She has been affiliated with the park since the spring of 2007. Although she became a park resident after the decision to make it women-only had already been made, she was able to comment on subsequent evolutions in the park’s culture. She said it was friendly when she arrived, and she could always “come down to the ground and find people to talk to.”3

Later a time came in the residential areas, which were full, when various cliques seemed to form and there was a kind of nastiness in the air. During the time of the cliques, the residential area got to be a kind of BDSM36 haven. Now I’m not shy about that (anymore); in fact I have done some RP37 at the edges. But you could walk down the streets and see women in cages, etc. I’m not sure which bothered me more—that or all the ban lines cause everyone had their security going. But those people moved out. I think K. realized it was not the welcoming, friendly, inclusive atmosphere she was doing this for. (interview with Derya)

Derya speaks highly and happily about the park’s current state. The residential population has declined, but that period of cliquishness and controversial practices seems to have

3 She could come down, that is, from her skybox. In Second Life, it is possible to place structures thousands of meters up in the sky, and since there is more privacy up there than on the ground, it’s a common choice for residences.

36 Bondage/domination/sadism/masochism.

37 Roleplay. Loosely defined as taking on the traits of a specific character when those with whom one interacts know that one is in character, roleplay takes place in Second Life in a variety of circumstances. Entire sims exist for those who want to roleplay participation in a specific kind of community, from a feudal Japanese countryside to a post-Armageddon city inhabited by demons and vampires. It may take place between individuals outside of a constructed roleplay setting, or it may be performed by an individual who plays a character fulltime regardless of whom she speaks with. Some people include their roleplay character’s description in their Profile.
passed. Notably, some of the activity that Derya observes having taken place during the first year that The Springs were women-only sounds like it might have been suspect, had it been performed by male-bodied avatars. Evidently, female avatar embodiment takes precedence over behavior in defining gender in this context, but Derya acknowledged that if someone were to behave in a way reminiscent of those men who were barred entrance to the park several years ago, that person’s gender would probably come under suspicion.

We discussed what “women-only” meant for the park, since the notecards for prospective members and new members do not explain this in avatar/real life embodiment terms. Although it goes unstated in the park’s materials, Derya said that the sex restriction is meant to refer to avatar embodiment. How that relates to actual world embodiment is even less clearly determined. Derya related an instance when a park member was revealed to be biologically male and met with inconsistent reactions from others in the park. Derya herself was not upset by the revelation, but others felt hurt or betrayed. Her description of the events, however, were framed by the detail that the man who had been engaged in the park as a female avatar was in real life a non-operative transsexual, that she actively identifies with femaleness and uses Second Life as a context in which she can interact freely and express her female identity. It is unclear whether Derya’s perspective would have been different if the man had been male-identified but using a female avatar for reasons other than realizing a deep-seated gender identity. That one may use the virtual sphere for expressing sides of one’s identity that are more difficult to express in the actual world, including gender identity, is one of the major
benefits of virtual interaction. Derya’s anecdote, however, points to what may be seen variously by Second Life residents as acceptable or unacceptable uses of cross-gender avatars: one might be fully accepting of the choice to use a cross-gender avatar if the person in question actually identifies more closely with the virtual gender than the actual sex, but gender switching for the purpose of experimentation or play could be more controversial.

**Constructing Virtual Gender - Identity**

Whether or not one’s virtual and actual genders/sexes (are perceived to) coordinate is just one part of what makes virtual worlds a useful context for examining theories of performativity. Angela Thomas, in *Youth Online*, her study of teens shaping their identities in virtual worlds, refers to “the avatar as an embodied performance of identity” (2007:35). Thomas understands virtual being as fundamentally textual, not only with regard to typed text but to visual texts as well. One can view “the body as a text, a text which is constructed to communicate meaning about one’s identity, and a text which is interpreted by others to mean certain things” (36). The teens in Thomas’s study use avatars to develop selfhood among their peers in virtual environments, embodying the characteristics they wish to communicate about themselves and the roles they play online.³⁸ Virtual worlds are textual, inside and out, in another way: through their coding. As Elizabeth Swift describes it, “There are no images, sounds, actions or exchanges to be experienced in virtual worlds that cannot be reduced to a string of letters and numbers

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³⁸ By and large, the virtual worlds Thomas’s participants use are game-style worlds that call upon players to develop themselves as characters that fit the theme. This style contrasts with Second Life, of course, but Thomas nonetheless illustrates that even in a structured roleplay environment, there is still a great investment of real life identity in the characters youths choose to play and in the ways they interact with others.
and accessed and manipulated through programming” (2010:173). Residents forming and expressing their identities visually in a virtual world engage with discourses on multiple levels to do so. To build a visual representation of oneself is to engage in a number of overlapping discourses—some informed by real life and others primarily virtual—to construct a self that may be more easily understood as performed than the visual self in the actual world.

I suggest that the most visible aspect of noncorporeal embodiment, as well as the part that Second Life residents negotiate most consciously, is the appearance and demeanor of the avatar. Engaging with the viewer’s controls and with the Second Life environment contribute to forming a sense of embodiment in the virtual world, but that embodied identity is expressed to others through the construction of a physical self. As in the real world, one’s social context can contribute to the ways one constructs the avatar. Residents may pick up visual cues from those around them and incorporate those cues into their avatars’ appearance, intentionally or unintentionally; the process of doing so can allow them to feel more closely connected with their avatars, such that developing a sense of avatar embodiment is a social process that may have very intimate consequences for the individual. Creating an avatar can also contribute to a strong sense of individuality: Second Life provides the tools for developing representations of oneself that are not possible to achieve in real life and that draw inspiration from fantasy or the user’s imagination. Whether one’s goal in avatar construction is to represent one’s sense of belonging in a given virtual community, whether it is to exercise the vast opportunities available to develop a highly individualized appearance, or whether it is simply to buy
and use clothing, body parts, and animations one happens to like without conscious regard for how the resulting appearance positions oneself among others, the process of negotiating the visible aspects of an online identity can enhance a user’s sense of embodiment within the virtual world.

Jacquelyn Ford Morie refers to “creating the form of the avatar that provides one’s identity to the virtual world” as “perhaps the highest form of art in the metaverse” (2010:170). Inworld artist Gracie Kendal (her avatar name) is in the midst of a long-running avatar portraiture project, currently named “1000+ Avatars,” depicting the rear view of her many subjects. The portraits are taken against an identical gray background and are displayed in a grid pattern on towering walls that surround a visitor to the project’s inworld location. Kendal regards the avatar as equivalent with identity. In a television interview posted to the project’s blog, she explains, “I’ve always been interested in the idea of identity… with changing, transforming, masquerade. So just the idea of what an avatar represents, how we can be anything we want, I think, has always held something within me, especially as pertains to my real life. I just like the idea that we can be anything we want.” The variety of avatars that cover the walls of Kendal’s exhibit illustrates the range of possibilities for physical expression of selfhood in Second Life; many are humans, but others incorporate slight variations like wings, tails, or robot parts. Some are full-fledged animals, uncategorizable creatures, and even inanimate objects. In the same interview, she says that she shoots all of her subjects from both the

39 http://1000avatars.wordpress.com/2011/02/08/1000-avatars-project-on-tonight-live-with-paisley-beebe/ Second Life television shows are taped inworld, typically with hosts’ and guests’ avatars present and their human counterparts speaking in voice. Frequently, they are conducted in front of a live audience of avatars and are simultaneously streamed on the Web. Residents who own televisions can also watch the programs via inworld media.
front and the rear, but it is the back view that she uses in the exhibit because “the original idea was about anonymity. I started questioning whether it really matters if we know who's on the other side of the computer…. The idea of taking the pictures from the back had to do with hiding the face, about being unrecognizable. So it was more symbolic than anything.” Although the pictures are of avatars, not real life bodies, hiding their faces is, in the 1000+ Avatars project, symbolic of concealing real life identity, almost as if identity would be too easily recognizable in the faces of the avatars as well. As interview host Paisley Beebe points out in response, those she knew in the project were easy to recognize even from behind (and having identified numerous people I know in the project as well, I concur), but I would suggest that this fact merely heightens both the symbolic aspect of hiding the face and emphasizes how closely avatar appearance becomes connected to a sense of identity.

Although Kendal may not intend it, another effect of displaying the portraits from the back is to present the view of each avatar that the avatars’ users most frequently have of their virtual selves. The default camera view of one’s own avatar is from behind and slightly above the avatar’s head. The exact placement varies somewhat with avatars of different heights and can be changed to suit one’s preferences, but changes will more likely be in height and angle and not, for instance, such that the user would be viewing the avatar’s face when he or she walks. In displaying over one thousand portraits of avatars’ backs, Kendal is presenting an avatar-specific perspective that qualifies as “through the eyes of” the subjects—the user subjects—cast simultaneously on their inworld identities.
To the extent that the development of the avatar can be art (per Morie), as the display of the avatar can be a display of identity (per Kendal), categories shift, overlap, and interact in the process of creation: the selecting of body parts that one may use continuously for months or years or may change on a more or less regular basis, the shopping for clothing in roughly the same way one might in real life or the static favoring of a given outfit, the outfitting of the avatar with animated stands that provide oneself with a desired style of bodily comportment. The means through which these pieces of the process add up to identity is performativity.

Judith Butler discusses the relationship between “acts, gestures, enactments” that “are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” but wherein “reality is fabricated as an interior essence” as well
The first part of this would seem obvious at the avatar level, where Second Life residents adopt a physical representation that seldom adheres completely to their actual selves. The second part has interesting implications when applied to the topic of avatar identity, opening up the notion that the real life individual behind the avatar is fabricated through the use of an online identity—not the presence of the individual, generally speaking, but the way the individual may be perceived or understood by those she or he interacts with virtually. The avatar is a performance of a self that the user might feel represents her, or a part of her, fairly closely. But it takes place through the use of assets (in the sense of the word used above in the discussion of inventory) that are available to nearly anyone in Second Life, providing a rather concrete illustration of the repetitive, recitational aspect of performativity: different avatars mix and match the assets and produce a different final result, but there is nonetheless a type of discursive meaning attached to specific pieces and to the way that they are arranged. These meanings are resignified with each use, no matter in how new a manner or combination. And what is significant about performativity to avatar identity is that these embodied discourses seem to convey something about the person behind the avatar.

An advantage of examining performativity in Second Life is, of course, that these embodied discourses and how they affect interaction with others can easily be manipulated. Caelan, one of my interview participants, has been using avatars of various genders and species throughout hir\textsuperscript{40} time in Second Life. “Obviously,” sie says, “I’m

\textsuperscript{40}“Hir,” “sie,” and “hirsself” are gender-neutral pronouns to reflect Caelan’s gender amorphousness. During the interview, sie expressed a desire to be able to use gender-neutral pronouns, at least with some of hir avatar personae. Although sie does not see such pronouns to be practicable in most contexts, since most people are unaccustomed to them, it is no trouble for me to use them here.
treated differently depending on which gender(s) I present. And so I can ‘get away’ with different behaviors according to that. As in, I can have different freedoms and limitations.” Caelan does not significantly alter hir personality when sie changes avatars, aside from occasionally playing up the campier characteristics of using non-human forms. Although sie might unintentionally convey more feminine or masculine traits depending on hir outward appearance, sie feels that the differences in interactions with others using hir different avatars has much to do with the way that genders are read, rather than expressed. This experience contrasts with the expectations of some of the contributors to the *Virtually Engendered* blog who have cross-gender alts but seldom use them, summarized in one response from Ricki, who usually uses a female avatar: “I do think it is more ‘work’ to ‘act’ male. I am always afraid that some phrase or gesture will come off as ‘girly’ and I’ll get called out.”

On the one hand, Caelan’s experience is that the performative discourses others respond to are highly visual: sie can change from a human male avatar to a human female avatar to a gender-ambiguous animal avatar and note markedly contrasting receptions. The forms sie takes seem to shape how others understand hir textual discourses. On the other hand, Ricki—a woman with a primary female avatar and a secondary male alt that she uses very little—expects that performing maleness convincingly would involve more than just using a male avatar, a perspective echoed by others on the blog. The work some believe it would require may make them nervous about using their cross-gender avatars more, which in turn makes it difficult for them to confirm or disprove their expectations. Educators holding classes on real life material in Second Life have sometimes used the
platform to assign gender- or race-changing tasks to their students (Farley 2010; Foster 2006). Certainly, these exercises provide an opportunity available in few other contexts to allow people to walk in others’ shoes, to an extent, even though the context and the scope of identification are limited. Nonetheless, they can give students some insight. “In some cases,” students using cross-gender avatars “reported identifying and feeling more like they expected that gender to feel. For example, one male student said he felt more submissive and less outspoken when he was operating through a female avatar” (Farley 2010:337).

As student assignments, gender- and race-crossing avatar exercises are educational, though some limitations must be noted. First, actual and virtual social contexts are significantly different; a white man can use a black female avatar and learn how people may speak to him differently, possibly feminizing him/her, and if he sticks with it for a while he might recognize subtle institutionalized racism in Second Life such as a scarcity of suitable and high-quality skins and other body parts for black-identified avatars. But he is unlikely to experience sexism and racism on par with what takes place in real life or to gain any insight on what it may be like to grow up female and black. Farley’s choice of words is accurate: students feel “like they expected” another gender to feel, not what they can know members of that gender to feel, which is not accessible through this kind of activity. Second, another set of limitations applies that does not spring from an actual/virtual distinction: students engaging in cross-identity exercises are not necessarily enculturated Second Life users, and it is difficult to tell to what extent they experience their avatars as embodiments of themselves, either prior to or as a result
of these learning activities. If a specially designed avatar is given to them, as was the case in the Farley exercise, it is uncertain whether the students have the opportunity to feel as strong a connection to the avatar as if they had constructed it themselves.

Of course, the fact that students can sometimes identify with a prefabricated avatar enough to learn from that embodiment suggests that gaining a sense of avatar embodiment does not have to take a particularly long time or even involve active personal engagement with the avatar’s development. For purposes of research on the role of performativity in building and expressing the self through the avatar, it may be useful to view long-term users’ relationships with their avatars. For instance, it is important to Ricki, quoted above, to be able to “pass” as male if she were to use a male avatar. She might use it among people whom she does not wish to know (at least at the outset) that the male avatar has a female user. Regular users, in contrast with students on assignment, may be more likely to understand Second Life as a broad social context where impressions of an avatar may follow it for some time. My speculation on this subject is based on experience, observation, and responses on the blog. For instance, Zan writes that she has discomfort using her male avatar for anything besides fitting clothing (which she sells): “I feel a strange need to be honest about who I am even online and even when I could be anonymous.” Complying with an assignment when the only social community one is connected to is also complying with the same assignment may not elicit the same kind of concerns about honesty and an ongoing sense of avatar-embodied self.

To summarize the usefulness of virtual worlds to theories of performativity (and of theories of performativity to virtual worlds), the realm of the avatar is a context in
which gender is conveyed via discourses. To the extent that the user learns to apply these discourses during her period of developing herself as a social and visual participant in the virtual world, she undergoes a fundamentally performative process, coming to recognize cues of femininity (or masculinity) and then learning to reiterate those cues through physical appearance and interactions. Not only are human avatar shapes systemically male or female, but the vast majority of user-created commodities for avatar development are designed as “male” or “female,” as well. Clothing stores with female and male sections are familiar to anyone who shops in the actual world as well. Similarly segregated sections for body parts and animation overrides would seem to be logical extensions of that, but they may also be understood as constructing the “biological” body in reverse. Whereas with actual bodies we take what we get (sex reassignment and other voluntary alterations notwithstanding), with virtual bodies users start from scratch and collectively reaffirm the range of appropriate ways to convey dichotomous genders even through representations of biological sex.

How one looks as well as how one behaves are both components of performativity, and examining the ways in which Second Life residents engage in these performative practices can make the constructedness of gender norms easily apparent in ways that may be obscured in the actual world, where it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what people may be perceived to be “born with” and what is learned. The behavior of gender chameleons like Caelan is interpreted by others according to hir current embodiment. Students on gender- and race-swapping assignments quickly feel how a change in embodiment affects their own social experiences. Long-time residents
like Ricki and Zan, who have an investment in their virtual social contexts, feel most comfortable performing the gender they perform in real life. The 1,000+ avatars photographed in Gracie Kendal’s project cover a wide range of performance, not only of gender but of species and of other embodied personae that cannot be replicated in the actual world but that contribute to virtual identities. In each of these examples, the significance of various factors—visual performance, behavioral performance, relevance of real life embodiment, relevance of real life norms—vary markedly. But these Second Life residents all share the experience of developing a virtual identity they use to convey themselves in embodied ways to other occupants of the virtual world, both as a vast plane of existence and within subcommunities with their own social norms.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out to explain the concept of noncorporeal embodiment and to sketch out some of the ways in which a recognition of a form of embodiment that is both related to the corporeal and set apart from it might be useful to certain areas of feminist theory. I have sought to illustrate that the avatar is not merely a cartoon that moves around at the will of a user but can be seen to possess a biology and is in many ways an extension of the user’s identity. Rather than evidencing a mind/body split, the software that mediates between the user and the avatar solidifies the bond between the two and complicates any serious distinction, as familiarity with one’s viewer facilitates ease of interaction and expression through one’s avatar. Noncorporeal embodiment thus not only comprises a rhizomatic relationship among a number of components but provides a useful example of the ways humanity is inseparable from the technology that it
creates. Read through the concept of Haraway’s cyborg and its implications for future understandings of gender and the body, noncorporeal embodiment may serve to be a helpful tool for feminist theorists engaging with changing forms of online, computerized global communication. Finally, examining gender performativity in a context where even “sex” is best understood as constructed gender may prove informative to those who explore the importance of visual and verbal discourses in the process of embodied identity formation in either virtual or actual worlds.
Chapter 3: Virtual Sexuality and Noncorporeal Bodily Acts

A socially oriented study of sexuality in Second Life can be traced along several different paths. One path might focus on a series of landmark events, including the genesis of sex animations built into furniture by pioneer content creator Stroker Serpentine beginning in 2004; the Wonderland playground scandal of October 2007, which drew attention to virtual pedophilia and the exchange of child pornography inworld\textsuperscript{41}; and Linden Lab’s establishment of the Zindra adult continent in June 2009, creating a strict geographical division between parts of SL that require age verification and those that do not. Another path could examine the many sexual subcultures that proliferate when fantasies can be realized in a physical environment more versatile than the actual world, the most visible of which are probably the Gorean role play world of sexual slavery drawn from the fiction of author John Norman,\textsuperscript{42} the use of Restrained Love\textsuperscript{43} technology to enhance the experience of bondage-domination-sadism-masochism.

\textsuperscript{41} Wonderland was a location in Second Life where adult avatars could allegedly negotiate sex for money with child avatars. This short video by British news outlet SkyNews was broadcast in October 2007: \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN_jr6xls90}. The scandal eventually led Linden Lab to prohibit sexual ageplay in SL; it remains the only type of consensual sexual conduct specifically prohibited in the SL Terms of Service.

\textsuperscript{42} The books are a blend of science fiction, fantasy, and antiquity themes, and role players in Second Life replicate the social roles spelled out in the narratives. Although sexual slavery is not Gor’s sole defining characteristic, it is a prominent one.

\textsuperscript{43} The Restrained Love Viewer (formerly called Restrained Life) and its counterpart API (application programming interface, which incorporates the viewer’s code into other viewers) allows fetish role players to give up control of their viewer functions to their Masters/Mistresses/Dominants/Owners. By wearing a relay—usually in a collar—consensual submissives or slaves can give their dominants control over almost
play, and the virtual sex industry, including escorting. A third path might look at the more mundane but consequently important ways in which Second Life residents, possessing bodies and sexualities in the actual world, understand and experience themselves in the virtual world also as sexual beings who might flirt, joke, date, dance, and explore physical intimacy in a noncorporeal yet highly social and interactive realm. These paths are not straight and defined but circuitous and cross-cutting. This chapter travels along pieces of all of them, with a primary focus on the role of virtual embodiment in experiencing sexuality in Second Life.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that Second Life users become invested in the embodiments they construct for themselves as avatars, albeit not in uniform ways. The association between mind and body, as traditionally understood, is complicated by the introduction of a virtual body that requires a different sort of attention and, in many ways, is the product of a number of different minds that contribute digitally to its internal and external physical makeup. Actual bodies in the actual world engage in activities that get termed “biological” for their emphasis and sometimes reliance on the body (or the body’s reliance on the activities): eating, exercise, sexual activity, etc., as well as internal functions like breathing and digestion. As I discussed in the previous chapter, avatars can be understood to have a different kind of internal biology. These other types of “biological activities,” however—the ones that can take place in a social environment—have equivalents in SL, SL being, after all, largely a social environment.
Eating and exercise in SL are novelties, much like installing a toilet in one’s virtual home; avatars do not require them, but users engage in them even while they realize there is no practical point to them. They also illustrate the extent to which users relate to their avatar bodies as bodies.

I begin this chapter, then, with a discussion of the mundane aspects of avatar biology, everyday sexuality, and relationships; I move into addressing the ways in which Linden Lab implicates itself into the management of avatar bodies and their sexuality; and later I examine the topic of immersionism and how it relates to some sexual subcommunities with a virtual presence. I draw from interviews, blog responses, and extant literature on these subjects, as well as examining some of Linden Lab’s policies and documentation. I make use of Second Life’s search functions in different areas to gauge the presence and nature of communities and to scrutinize the adult content of the SL Marketplace, the web-based sales site for inworld merchandise. Written sources include academic research but also user blogs, journalism, and survey-based studies conducted by independent researchers. I wrap up by relating the topic to Tom Boellstorff’s concept of techne, which I use to suggest how noncorporeal embodiment serves to provide users with outlets for both normative and unique sexual desires as well as offering a jumping-off point for imagining new ways of understanding sexuality that are less securely bound to assumptions about corporeal bodies in the corporeal world.

Everyday People, Everyday Acts
Sparrow’s response to a blog question about why reflections of bodily needs exist in Second Life and whether respondents see some as odd and others as entertaining is worth quoting in full:

I don’t get the SL kitchens at all. Why someone would use up precious (well to me) prims with kitchen stuff is beyond me. Even if it’s for SLex – I wouldn’t use a kitchen. While I enjoy the SL bathtubs and showers for the SLex, since I’m not into toilet play they are also non-existent in my SLife.

Now I do have tons of “food” and “drink” just because I think they’re fun to use. I always have serving foods up at my house, like cheese or fruit platters that dispense. I also have the “wearable” food for obvious reasons.

One biological need in which I do indulge is putting my avi to bed every night before I log off. Usually wearing sleeping attire. It’s my way of capping off my SL day. The next morning I dress her for the day, even if I won’t be online until after work or later. And yes – there are meds for this :) . (Sparrow, blog respondent)

In Sparrow’s response, there is a virtual hierarchy of biological “needs.” At the bottom of the hierarchy are those artifacts of biology that Sparrow considers too superfluous to take seriously, such as kitchens and toilets. In the next place up are her habits of putting her avatar in bed before logging off at night and then logging back in the next morning just to get dressed, a routine that she recognizes as her own indulgence, a little silly for most but something she nonetheless enjoys. Another step up the hierarchy is her use of non-wearable food and drinks, another example of something she simply finds fun but in this case a novelty about which she doesn’t express humility. Next come wearable food and drinks; unlike non-wearable items, these she has “for obvious reasons”; wearable food and drinks bear meanings to active Second Life residents, meanings that are probably
inaccessible to those outside of SL’s social contexts. To Sparrow, though, they are everyday enough that they require little explanation.\footnote{“Wearable” in this context typically means that a food or drink object can be attached to an avatar’s hand or mouth. Usually, the object will also contain a script that poses or animates the avatar to appear to be holding or consuming the food or drink in a (relatively) realistic way. Animated wearable beverages of this type in particular are abundant in Second Life. Coffee mugs, cocktail glasses, and any other drinking vessel imaginable get shared as freebies in social settings so that everyone in a group can hold a champagne glass during a soiree or sip tea at a Victorian luncheon. One might type in chat, “I love cookies,” and then find oneself with several free cookies given by nearby friends, cookies that serve no purpose but to be worn like an accessory in the hand. Sparrow’s “obvious reasons” are probably not obvious to everyone even within SL—what is fun to some is pointless inventory clutter to others—but her statement implies that food is ubiquitous, and this, I believe, is more likely to be commonly agreed upon.}
dwelling and engaging in virtual sexual activity. Of course, Sparrow’s hierarchy is hers alone; different people would be likely to place objects and activities differently on the scale from questionable to unquestioned. My experience in Second Life suggests that many residents, possibly most, would consider virtual homes and virtual sex in a similar way to Sparrow, however. Even those who do not have their own home or who make a conscious decision not to engage in sexual activity in SL nonetheless recognize them as normal parts of virtual living for others.

I suggest that a sense of non-corporeal embodiment is closely tied to virtual sexuality. Whether or not one is sexually active in Second Life and in what ways are likely related to how one feels about one’s virtual presence. The details, I believe, vary widely from one person to another: one person might use SL as a sexual playground while another might be content with flirting and dancing; one person might realize unusual fantasies and enact dangerous fetishes while another’s virtual sex life might closely resemble her actual one. What I am most interested in exploring in this section, though, is the fact that to hundreds of thousands of individual users, avatar embodiment seems to be a legitimate and effective means of expressing and experiencing sexuality, a category of concepts that are arguably among those most closely associated with the corporeal body.

Sexual response can be and has long been mediated in a number of ways, through erotic materials ranging from written to visual, softly suggestive to intensely pornographic. Physical interaction between bodies is not necessary to stir a response from a consumer of these media. Sexual activity in a virtual world similarly mediates between
corporeally embodied participants, but where it picks up and traditional erotica leaves off is in allowing—even forcing—all parties to be physically present. Although it is possible to be a voyeur in Second Life, witnessing other avatars engage with one another, it is an embodied voyeurism and thus the voyeur might be understood as a passive participant. What is not possible is to be a detached, invisible, unknowable voyeur, like a member of the audience at a film; the virtual voyeur can be a peeping tom hoping to go unnoticed or an invited guest in a couple’s bedroom, but he or she is not a mere spectator. As wide as a user’s control over the form of virtual embodiment may be, the user cannot escape embodiment itself.

Simultaneously, the avatar serves as a representation of the corporeal self. The salience of the corporeal self might wax and wane through the day-to-day interactions of avatars. I can have an entire conversation with another Second Life resident about visiting a new and impressive build inworld, shopping for hair, and participating in a gridwide hunt, during which our actual, corporeal identities never factor into the discussion as anything more than background. Alternatively, these topics of conversation might lead us to reference ourselves—or simply think of ourselves—in more or less embodied ways, when we feel a visceral reaction upon viewing a stunning piece of virtual architecture, purchase a hairstyle that closely mimics one’s real life hair, or experience a wave of emotional excitement after finding a hard-to-locate prize in a

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45 The word “build” can colloquially refer to anything built and rezzed inworld at all. In context, a Second Life resident would recognize that here I mean a large-scale creation such as a building or entire sim.
46 Gridwide hunts are scavenger hunts in which content creators put out free items for hunters to locate and acquire. Their purpose is primarily promotional for the stores that participate.
47 This is not to say that these topics of conversation are forbidden—individuals take extremely different approaches from one another with regard to their real life information—but simply to say that in an example like this, those real life details are not automatically salient or even relevant.
hunts. In addition, it is seldom possible to compartmentalize mental, emotional, and physical responses as they occur to embodied beings.

I suggest that the salience of the corporeal body is probably greater for most people where virtual expressions and experiences of sexuality are concerned than in examples like those previously mentioned. Judging by responses to the blog question about whether respondents reference biological needs inworld—Sparrow’s and those of others—the salience of the corporeal body is probably greater with respect to sexuality than with respect to other virtual biological functions, as well. Virtual food can be fun and social and can “improv[e] a sense of immersion, providing markers in SL that people can recognize from RL, triggering appropriate senses of place, behavior, and expectations” (Puck, blog respondent). But it can’t satisfy a biological need for food, nor does it seem to be widely used to curb an emotional craving. I suggest that virtual sexuality, in comparison, may be as commonplace as it is (even if there is no such thing as a commonplace form of virtual sexuality) specifically because it implicates the corporeal body in ways that virtual food and bathrooms do not; simultaneously, it is the non-corporeal body, the avatar, that allows users to engage interactively, socially, and creatively, providing a different reach of sexual experiences—and the potential for sexual identities, even—from the use of more traditional erotic media.

“Sexual identities” here can refer to a couple of different senses of the term, just as it does in real life. When I asked respondents to the Virtually Engendered blog to describe how they approach sexuality in Second Life and how, if at all, that approach has changed over time, the nature of the responses differed in some ways from the responses
to all previous blog posts. Up until that point, nearly all contributions were written by people I am acquainted with in SL, who used either their primary avatar names or the names of alt avatars that are nonetheless known to their closest friends. That is, contributors’ posts were occasionally somewhat private, but not one was anonymous. All posts were tied to identities inworld that were recognizable to me and potentially to other respondents. The question about sexuality brought in the first anonymous replies, two out of six respondents choosing pseudonyms and a third using an alt name that would not be recognized by me or other readers. Two people contacted me outside of the blog to answer the question in private conversations rather than posting on a public website. The move toward more privacy isn’t particularly surprising, given that sexuality can be a sensitive and personal topic, but it still merits discussion.

The avatar is the physical side of one’s online identity, and in her study of youths participating and developing their identities in virtual worlds, Angela Thomas applies an interpretation of Butler’s theory of performativity to analyzing how her participants shape and express their identities. Identity, to Thomas, is about a number of things, including “an embodied, emotional experience that is evident through either silence or aspects of language” (2007:195). The expression of an avatar identity is a matter not only of what one does and says in the name of that avatar but of what one omits. Many of the respondents to that particular question on the blog preferred for their words and experiences on the subject of sexuality not to be associated with their primary avatar identities but, significantly, still wanted to share them.

A look at the responses themselves can help further in elucidating the ways in
which some avatars’ sexual identities may be managed. All three anonymous posters describe periods of extensive sexual activity, Kaede and Jackie referring to these periods in the past and Haven implying that it is something she or he did not do immediately upon joining Second Life but which she or he does engage in now. Sparrow relates a beginning in SL similar to Kaede and Jackie’s, though she does so without altering the name she had attached to previous blog responses. These three stories all follow an uncannily similar pattern, in which the respondent enters Second Life intending to take advantage of the adult environment: Kaede “whored up [her] avatar and trolled the free sex places”; Jackie “stripped nekked and hopped in the smut-scripted beds and marveled at [her] avatar’s agility”; Sparrow also “did the ‘wanton random’ SLex thing when [she] started in SL,” finding it “funny and to a degree liberating.” But all three transitioned to a less “active” expression of sexuality when Kaede “got bored,” Jackie grew “jaded,” and Sparrow found it “got old.” All three indicate that they migrated toward forms of sexuality that conform more closely to conventional real world dating and partnership, carrying out more or less steady, long-term relationships with no more than one or two partners at a time. Although she entered SL with different intentions, not expecting to participate in SL on an adult level, Gabby is another respondent who eventually ended up in a committed, long-term, sexually active virtual relationship; she began differently from Kaede, Jackie, and Sparrow, but she is now in a similar place. For these respondents, virtual sex became more strongly paired with love and affection over time than it had been before they were socially invested in the virtual world.

In Thomas’s characterization of identity, it is also (in addition to the previously
quoted section) about “performance of desire and the experimentation with self through exploration of desires, curiosities and/or fantasies” (2007:195). When real life presents pressures to be sexually skilled and desirable while placing counter-pressure on women in particular not to go overboard—alongside the message that doing so increases women’s risk to sexual dangers—it is not surprising that Second Life would emerge as a realm of experimentation and enactment of fantasy sexuality. The virtual world is a relatively safe space where vulnerabilities may be emotional or mental but not typically physical and where sexual activity need not reflect on one’s real life identity unless one wishes it to. However, I suggest along with Thomas that for many people, though perhaps not for all, the longer one resides in a virtual world like Second Life, the more one’s identity is “realized through identification: (a) of self to the avatar, and (b) of self with groups and/or communities” (2007:194). Using SL as an ongoing fantasy environment could, for some, conflict emotionally with the forging of friendships, communities, and relationships that are based on “real” personal bonds and sharing of interests. A category of exceptions that I will address later are those whose primary identities are rooted in sexual communities that have limited or no real life equivalents.

Linden Lab and the Management of Noncorporeal Sexuality

As I have already discussed somewhat, I am interested in the fact that avatar embodiment is a normal and, within the Second Life context, perhaps even normative, means of expressing and experiencing sexuality. Part of what I would like to address in exploring this topic are the institutional elements that are geared toward allowing or encouraging sexual—or at least “Adult”—interaction in Second Life. Primarily this
includes Linden Lab’s evolving approaches and policies concerning age verification, the availability of sex-related merchandise, and the establishment of the adult continent of Zindra. Linden Lab revisits and readjusts how adult content and residents’ access to it are handled on a fairly regular basis and, correspondingly, exerts some influence over the use of avatar bodies as sexual entities. What follows is a discussion of how Linden Lab policies and practices reflect and function in conjunction with how Second Life users embody sexuality inworld.

Prior to 2007, there was comparatively little regulation of sexual content. After the scandals that brought Linden Lab negative press due to representations of underage sexual activity inworld, however, LL instituted new age verification processes through outside company Aristotle/Integrity, “which works by verifying a personal identity record against a combination of government-issued ID and other personal identity data.”48 Even though the scandal involved avatars that appeared to be children, rather than users known to be minors, it called attention to the fact that actual minors could easily use Second Life. Further, if there were already Second Life users looking to enact sexual activity with childlike avatars, the danger to real child users seemed imminent. Although the existing registration process required registrants to affirm that they were 18 or older, beginning in spring 2007, Linden Lab implemented age verification and required explicit sexual content to be isolated within age verification-only areas (Cheng 2007), which themselves were established and handled by their owners as parcels or regions.49

49 A region is a 256m-by-256m piece of land, thousands of which compose the grid’s basic structure. A parcel is a smaller piece of land within a region. It can be any size the region owner designates and is controlled by an owner or tenant who may or may not be the region owner as well.
Linden Lab’s first major move toward regulating avatar sexuality was thus to tie avatar bodies more firmly and officially to their corresponding real bodies. Verifying one’s age through Aristotle involved submitting real life identification through a website.\textsuperscript{50} Notably, the process was optional for anyone who did not want access to age verification-required areas. Though some parcel owners might require age verification for non-sexual reasons,\textsuperscript{51} age verification bore (and still bears) the connotation of sexual content. The corporeal body thus became a solid background component in the noncorporeal body’s enactment of virtual sexuality.

Age verification was also thus not a new concept when the next major restructuring took place two years later. The grid had only two maturity ratings throughout this period, “PG” and “Mature,” and private landowners could set their Mature locations to age verified-only visitors.\textsuperscript{52} PG locations were to be free of sexual content of all kinds, but within Mature regions, the delineations were murkier. Publicly accessible areas could contain content that was suitable for adults but that was not explicitly sexual, the latter being confined to locations with age verification, but what those criteria actually meant was not always obvious. As Second Life news blogger Tateru Nino put it at the time, “It’s hard to find two Second Life residents who agree on the definitions of PG and Mature in Second Life, and even then, we wouldn’t expect that...
to match whatever definitions and criteria that Linden Lab uses for enforcement” (Nino 2009).

A simultaneous problem with the 2007-2009 maturity rating/age verification system was that age verification-required parcels could exist alongside publicly accessible ones, and although residents lacking age verification could not enter them, the proximity of brothels and sex parks to clothing stores, jazz clubs, and educational builds was not necessarily appreciated even by those who had age verified, as is evident in Linden Lab’s explanation for the changes that came in 2009: “The main goal of these changes is control over your experience: if you don’t want to see adult content, you have that choice.” The solution for resolving both the problem of ambiguous maturity designations and the commingling of areas with different maturity ratings and age verification statuses was a far less ambiguous relocation of avatar bodies.

The adult continent of Zindra was established to accommodate these avatar bodies, along with the businesses and residences that had been scattered across the Second Life mainland in their isolated age-verified pockets. Instead of the parcel-by-parcel maturity designations, the change would establish Zindra as a “red light district” (Urriah 2011), an entire continent where (almost) anything goes. The “Adult” maturity rating and its official definition were added, as well, to more clearly distinguish among what types of content would be suitable in each type of region. The geographic redistribution caused some to speculate that sexuality (and, by implication, those who practice and embody it) was being ghettoized (Barnes 2009). The opposite risk was

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vocalized, as well, that if Zindra proved popular, “it could make SL’s already sullied reputation as a virtual sex world even worse” (Barnes 2009). Whatever the broader ramifications for Second Life communities, and despite concerns about adult content being stigmatized, the establishment of the Zindra continent reaffirmed the centrality of sexuality to the identities of many avatars, and there is some evidence of a strong community spirit among some of those who make Zindra their home or workplace.54

The story of Linden Lab’s active role in structuring access to sexual content gained another chapter in the summer of 2011 when the age verification process was altered without public announcement. The outsourced age verification process that required submission of official forms of identification was replaced with a checkbox. Starting on or shortly prior to July 1, 2011, residents wishing to verify their age in order to access adult content would be directed to a page asking them to enter their birthdate and mark a checkbox with the instructions, “By checking this box, you’re confirming that the date of birth entered above is true and accurate. Adult content in Second Life is just that—for adults only. We’ll spell it out for you: if you are under 18, do not check this box! If you are—check it, and off you go” (Nino 2011). Once verified, the user is given a link to the Destination Guide, now including adult destinations they would henceforth be entitled to visit, with links to their locations inworld.

Since Linden Lab never made any public statement concerning the change in age verification, there is no publicly known reason for the decision. Aristotle/Integrity’s

54 The Zindra Community Center website (http://zindracommunity.com/) and business blog owners (http://zindrabusiness.blogspot.com/) publish news about activities throughout the adult continent, including the annual Zexpo event that showcases merchants, artists, organizations, and so forth, adult and non-adult, around Zindra.
system was flawed and easily circumvented (Mistral 2009), insufficient for many international residents (Nino 2008), and prone to malfunction, but Linden Lab did not change to a different service provider or move the system in-house; they abandoned ID-based verification entirely. Further, within months of the change, the Lab began sending emails to residents who were not yet age verified with information about how easy it had become (Voyager 2011). Thus, not only did Linden Lab essentially reverse the age verification standards established in 2007 but also began to promote access to adult content to those they believed to be old enough.

One possible reason for the shift in policy intersects with yet another way in which avatar bodies and virtual sexuality influence Linden Lab and Second Life operations: the consumption of virtual goods. As I have addressed, the majority of Second Life residents customize their avatars through purchasing clothing, body parts, and animations, finding them for free, or making the items themselves. There is thus an investment of money, time, and/or work involved in making one’s avatar one’s own. Because adequate content creation requires some skill and learning, there are few avatar components that brand new residents are likely to be able to create on their own (the shape, which is made entirely in the viewer using tools that are mostly clearly labeled, is the primary exception). Becoming part of SL’s consumer culture, as a result, is nearly unavoidable.

55 Issues brought up on help forums by residents having trouble with age verification are good illustrations. Examples are here: http://secondlife.lithium.com/t5/Account/Age-Verification-Problems/qa-p/835183/comment-id/2939 and http://community.secondlife.com/t5/Account/I-m-having-age-verification-problems/qa-p/933237 (both accessed 17 November 2011).
Beyond that, residents’ degrees of involvement in consumerism are highly variable: some people are content to outfit their avatar once and never change, while others find their inventories overflowing with large quantities of products they never use. Ultimately, how one looks, how one moves, what one does, what defines one’s living space, and so on, are expressed through consumer goods. Notably, for purposes of this section, this also includes exhibiting one’s sexuality.

Virtual trade takes place both inworld and out-of-world, the latter on websites that resemble standard online shopping sites but that deliver purchases to the avatar’s account inworld. Inworld stores are controlled by the residents who sell their products. They can be large or small, scanty or elaborate, stand-alone, in a mall, or integrated into a themed region. Out-of-world shopping sites have existed in conjunction with Second Life for years, some of them run by Linden Lab and others by outside innovators. Currently the only one in operation is the Linden-run Marketplace. Second Life content creators can post their wares to the Marketplace website, where other users can browse and purchase items in a wide range of categories with a click of a button. Vendors who sell their goods on the Marketplace forfeit a portion of sales revenue to Linden Lab, but there is no charge for posting the merchandise, making Marketplace a good complement or alternative to an inworld storefront for many sellers.

The Marketplace is also an excellent source for examining the range of items that users buy and sell for use in Second Life, and its search filters provide an easy tool for viewing specific kinds of merchandise. Among these are filters for category and maturity level. I performed a search of each category of virtual goods using different maturity
settings to see what proportion of available products are classified as “Adult.” The results are recorded in Table 1. Products are classified as Adult if they contain “strong sexual content,” “extremely violent content,” “profanity” in the textual description, or “depictions of or references to illegal drug use.” The maturity ratings of the nearly two million items listed in the Marketplace vary widely by category, with 7.43% of the items overall being classified as Adult. The category with the smallest percentage of Adult items is Animals, which mostly comprises breedable creatures and pets and of which less than one percent constitutes Adult material. At the other end of the spectrum, 21.50% of the Art category depicts Adult content in either the product or its description. The Animations category has the next-largest proportion of Adult content, with 18.16%; since Adult animations are necessary for visual representations of sexual activity inworld, this is not particularly surprising. The Avatar Appearance area of the Marketplace might owe its 15.23% Adult content to the same part of the listing guidelines as the Art section might owe its even larger count: that nude images, including genitals or female nipples, are enough to rate the material as Adult. Thus, ads for skins that display the product in full are regarded as Adult content on the Marketplace, as are pieces of nude art. Interestingly, this standard diverges from the inworld guidelines for maturity ratings, in which nudity falls under the Adult heading only if it is “photo-realistic” or if it expressly “promotes sexual conduct, for instance through pose-balls.”

Table 1: Marketplace Merchandise by Maturity Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total items</th>
<th>General &amp; Moderate</th>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Percentage Adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animations</td>
<td>73170</td>
<td>59879</td>
<td>13291</td>
<td>18.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparel</td>
<td>736500</td>
<td>688563</td>
<td>47938</td>
<td>6.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>44152</td>
<td>43839</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>0.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>58160</td>
<td>45658</td>
<td>12502</td>
<td>21.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio &amp; Video</td>
<td>7651</td>
<td>7220</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>5.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avatar Accessories</td>
<td>253277</td>
<td>238497</td>
<td>14773</td>
<td>5.83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avatar Appearance</td>
<td>158926</td>
<td>134716</td>
<td>24210</td>
<td>15.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Components</td>
<td>163175</td>
<td>160954</td>
<td>2221</td>
<td>1.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>19916</td>
<td>18965</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>4.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrations</td>
<td>81421</td>
<td>30056</td>
<td>1365</td>
<td>1.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gadgets</td>
<td>17910</td>
<td>17537</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>2.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home &amp; Garden</td>
<td>271458</td>
<td>247014</td>
<td>24444</td>
<td>9.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainland</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>8787</td>
<td>8431</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>4.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Islands</td>
<td>2517</td>
<td>2437</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation &amp;</td>
<td>47689</td>
<td>43869</td>
<td>3820</td>
<td>8.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripts</td>
<td>6881</td>
<td>6709</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Used Items</td>
<td>2550</td>
<td>2305</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>9.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicles</td>
<td>21546</td>
<td>21150</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>1.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>18970</td>
<td>18548</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>2.22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everything Else</td>
<td>4217</td>
<td>3948</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>6.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Categories</td>
<td>1999880</td>
<td>1851279</td>
<td>148601</td>
<td>7.43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recorded 1 February 2012. In most cases, the Total Items column will reflect the sum of the General and Moderate and Adult columns. Where there is a slight discrepancy, it is because of the constantly changing stock on the site, reflecting that another item was added in that category while I was taking numbers from each maturity rating.

The numbers here only indicate how many products of each kind are available; they do not show which of them are most often purchased. The 7.43% of Marketplace-
listed items that are Adult may be a small portion of the overall total, but because a percentage of the money from all Marketplace purchases goes to Linden Lab, LL has a stake in making that 7.43% of the Marketplace accessible to as many people as possible while still maintaining a policy that does not inadvertently expose minors to the material. If users are especially likely to purchase Adult merchandise through the Marketplace, that is, to engage in a privately conducted transaction, as compared with visiting an inworld store, then there might be reason to believe further that LL has an interest in encouraging age verification and, thus, access to the Adult products listed on the Marketplace.

The past five years of changes in Linden Lab policy and involvement in commerce do not necessarily show a particular pattern or direction of engagement with avatar bodies and their sexuality, but they illustrate that Second Life residents possess virtual bodies that are recognized even by Linden Lab as sexual and that thus require some form of management (though that form is subject to revision). In some of the shifts, the connection between the corporeal body and the noncorporeal body is reinforced through deliberate adjustments to the age verification process and what the process means. Linden Lab’s association with Adult sales on the Marketplace is less direct. When LL sent emails to all their yet-unverified members in fall 2011 encouraging over-18 users to take advantage of the relaxed age verification process, however, they could have reasonably expected that it would result in more revenue via Marketplace commissions as

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58 The teen grid was dissolved in early 2011, long before the implementation of the checkbox for age verification. There are thus 16- and 17-year olds on the main grid, though they are not permitted to access Moderate or Adult regions or view content with these ratings on Marketplace.
more users would become able to access the Adult content on the site. In this respect, too,
LL participates in residents’ investment in themselves as sexual beings, to the extent that
they benefit from the purchase of furniture, animations, bodily appendages, and many
less conventional sexual or otherwise Adult items through the Marketplace.

The Avatar’s Body

The avatar body is important to sexuality, as evidenced by the proliferation of
products available for managing not only the body’s static appearance but also its
animations. As noted above, Animations constitute one of the categories of products on
the Second Life Marketplace with the greatest percentage of listings classified as Adult
(18.16%). Although Adult products make up only 9% of the Home and Garden category
overall, the number inflates to 17.3% when the Furniture filter is selected within the
larger category (20,649 Adult out of 119,355 total furniture items); the site does not
provide a more specific filter than this, but one might expect the percentage of Adult
items to increase even further among beds. Although many people engage in virtual
sexuality without the aid of animated furniture, it is clear that enough do that such
products take up a sizable chunk of the virtual furniture market. Virtual embodiment and
performance of sexual acts through embodiment become a significant part of having and
expressing sexuality inworld, at least for some.

Some people have strong preferences about whether they use animations or not
and whether they use voice, text, or a combination. One perception that was reflected in
some of the blog responses and interviews is that newer residents use animations,
sometimes using only animations (i.e., with no verbal communication between the
participants), and that there is a progression toward less use of these and greater simultaneous use of verbiage, whether written or spoken. In our interview, for example, Eko discussed her first months in Second Life, during which she carried out a very poseball-centered sex life before gradually discovering that she needed at least a mental, if not emotional, connection with her partners. “Then one day I met a man at one of the sex places and we just started talking. He was having a rough time in RL with relationships and such and I just wound up listening to him (while our avatars were going wild on poseballs lol)” (Eko, interview). This encounter opened up a new phase in Eko’s virtual life in which sexuality was to be communicative as well as animated. “Oh it was so funny, because other male avatars would come by and ask if they could have a turn. It was a scream.”

Residents often have strong preferences for voice or text, at least contextually, as well. In an interview on a Second Life talk show, Stephanie Steamweaver, the owner of a popular voice sex lounge, described voice sex—particularly enacted in the open as it is at her establishment—as “addictive. It brings a whole new level to SL because they’re not only seeing pixels doing this, they’re hearing it as well.” Even those who do not use voice on a regular basis sometimes feel that “voice does add that extra layer of ‘connection’—once you’ve heard a person laugh you can’t help but feel closer to them” (Evren, blog respondent).

For others, text is preferable because voice threatens immersion, the sense that one’s avatar and virtual context take precedence for the time spent inworld. Although

Evren values voice for its connectivity, he seldom uses it. As a female-to-male transsexual still living as female in real life and using a male avatar inworld, he is reticent to bring a female-seeming part of himself into a context where he can express himself as male. He is open enough about his gender orientation to include it in his inworld profile, so it is not a matter of compromising anyone else’s perception of him; it is solely how he feels about hearing himself: “It just doesn’t feel right to me to attach my voice to my avatar. I say my avatar is a representation of the ‘Real’ me and perhaps that is where my difficulty lies; my voice as it is doesn’t feel like my ‘real’ voice.” Farai shared a similar sentiment, saying that the difference of decades between her real age and her avatar’s appearance means that “using Voice creates a ‘stutter’ in her [the avatar’s] persona” (blog respondent). Communicating in text can be a way to preserve the sense of noncoporeal embodiment that some users experience through their avatars. This can be the case even when there is no significant rift like age or sex between the avatar’s appearance and the voice that would be linked to it. For some like Deniz (blog respondent), the fact that text allows them to communicate more clearly is enough for them to favor typing.

The blog respondents who jumped straight into the adult community and then settled into a pattern of conventional dating over time may have been playing the part of the sexual adventurer before settling into a role closer to “themselves” (i.e., their real life identities). This does not necessarily mean that there is less performance involved when one enacts an identity that more closely resembles how one views oneself. Rather, the performance simply shifted focus: when one is in a community of one’s peers, there is more management of self, visible in the fact that several respondents wanted to
distinguish their current public personae from the sexually active newbies they used to be. Whether they are disassociating themselves from their early virtual incarnations because they were sexually active or because they behaved like stereotypical poseball-hopping newbies is a compelling question. The answer could of course be both.

The development of the avatar body as a conduit of sexual expression is notable here, as well. Although I have touched at times on the work that many residents put into developing their avatars over time, a persisting stereotype about new residents, particularly male residents, takes a somewhat different form. That stereotype can be encapsulated by the male newbie and his “freenis” (free penis). When I was new in March 2008, brand new avatars infamously had no nipples. Since then, Linden Lab has gone a step further and now puts permanent underwear or even permanent full outfits on the skins of newbie avatars. Males, of course, are eunuchs, since genitals are prim attachments and are not part of the default avatar. Even after a new user finds a (non-Linden) skin with nipples and no underwear, prim genitals still must be found separately. Although it cannot be assumed that all new male residents attribute the same amount of importance to the procuring of prim genitals, enough seek them out early on to contribute to the stereotype.

This supposed need for a freenis to complete the male embodiment is frequently parodied, even caricatured. For example, a friend of mine has a set of pictures on Flickr, the photo sharing website, devoted to male newbies wearing their brand new freenis in
inappropriate places.\textsuperscript{60} Usually “inappropriate places” means in geographic regions not intended for sexual activity, but also occasionally the pictures show the freenis hovering comically in front of the avatar’s body because the newbie has not learned how to edit attachments yet. In a gesture of self-deprecation, another friend includes in the text of his profile: “I had ten, but now have eighteen free penises I never use. Some would say that’s too many. Others, not enough.” He calls attention to his onetime rush to acquire freenises by disassociating himself from their use (“penises I never use”) and thus participates in the same caricature of the freenis that the Flickr photo set conveys.

As easy as it is to call attention to the iconic nature of the freenis as a source of humor,\textsuperscript{61} we can also examine it in terms of virtual embodiment. On the one hand, being a complete male evidently means having the parts for it, at least for some new users. On the other hand, the wearing of a freebie penis means exposing it, as well, with such newbies sometimes either going about nude or with the freenis attached to the outside of their pants. If this is seen as an act carried out as an expression of the freenis-bearer’s real world sense of embodiment, it would imply that the user feels some kind of connection to his avatar as a streaker, nudist, or exhibitionist. While these identities may apply to some

\textsuperscript{60} The “Ugly Freenisses” set is located here: http://www.flickr.com/photos/40795370@N02/set/72157625979765253/. Viewing the set requires sign-in, but a Flickr account is free. Most of the pictures also belong to a more general “Noobies” set that is visible to all visitors: http://www.flickr.com/photos/40795370@N02/set/72157621831037678/. Photos by Ansariel Hiller (Accessed 15 February 2012).

\textsuperscript{61} They would be humorous, of course, to those who do not use them (including those who have grown out of their use). From the time I have spent as a regular user of Second Life I have also come across other ways in which residents who have been around a while disassociate themselves from certain behaviors they might have picked up when they were new. For women (female avatars), that often means certain fashion “errors” that seemed like a good idea at the time but that they later regret. Although this might sound like a telling dichotomy—male avatars err with their freenises while female avatars err with their clothing—the dichotomy is not fully rigid. I recall two separate female friends, for instance, relating stories about their prim nipple use from their early days (prim attachments can make nipples look more aroused; the fact that clothing cannot be worn over them was the source of both friends’ misadventures).
(naturism in particular has its own subculture in Second Life), I think it is more likely that a sense of physically embodied identity is taking precedence over a sense of socially embodied identity. To put this in other words, the new resident may be more inclined to seek out ways to feel connected to his avatar through supplying the avatar with the equipment that defines him as male than he is to determine whether he is doing so in a way that would be acceptable within his virtual social context.

An attachment to one’s attachment is not limited to newbies. Higher-quality (and not usually free) genitals provide many more options, such as the ability to wear them all the time and render them transparent. In this case, when the penis is “needed,” the wearer can simply click the attachment or a HUD and make the body part appear (whether to do so before or after disrobing is a matter of preference). Even a transparent object is easily brought into view, though (Highlight Transparent is a function in all viewers that tints transparent prims red for one’s own view without affecting how others see them), so although this type of worn penis may be discreet, it is not completely private. Most male avatars do not wear penises in this way, but one reason some have given to me is that they consider the penis to be essential to their feeling a sense of embodiment when using their avatars.\footnote{In one particularly memorable conversation with a stranger, I had remarked in a social context that male avatars who wear invisible genitals when they were not in use struck me as insecure. The stranger disagreed and offered the explanation that he simply did not feel like his avatar was fully male when he was not wearing his attachment (which reflected my argument but without the negativity of the “insecure” attribution) and added that he also did not want to rummage in his inventory to find it when he needed it.} It is more common for male avatars to wear their penises only when the
avatar itself is naked, and when a male avatar is naked, it is more or less expected that he will attach a penis.  

In my earlier discussion of the Marketplace, I addressed animations and animated furniture. Objects created for the purpose of simulating body movement are standard throughout Second Life. An avatar body is going to be in some position at all times, even if it is just standing in a default Linden animation. Social circumstances tend to prescribe what position one uses at a given time. If an avatar is not dancing at a dance club, the person might be asked why. If everyone is seated at a meeting, someone who is standing will stand out. Avatars are animated by their own animation overrides, by the furniture they sit on, by objects they click on, by other people’s HUDs offering to animate them, by things they hold, and so on. Non-human avatars may have built-in animations that simulate the movement of the animals or objects they are meant to resemble. In each case, the animations provide yet another way for users to customize their avatar through movement and thus potentially feel more closely the avatar’s embodiment.  

On this note, I would like to return to the topic of sex furniture. Stroker Serpentine is credited with establishing his SexGen brand of sex furniture first in 2004, and he has at times filed real life lawsuits against copycats to secure his intellectual property rights, but the concept of sex furniture is by now generic. Though content creators might find themselves slapped with a DMCA (Digital Millennium Copyright Act) notification if they use someone else’s exact animations without purchasing them,  

63 As I mentioned, it is possible to tell what kind of attachments people are wearing by highlighting transparent prims. There are many reasons one might want to turn the highlighting feature on besides looking for attachments, such as finding lost objects.
the ability to create original furniture that serves the purpose of animating avatars into sexual positions is open to all. The 17.3% of the furniture on the Marketplace I earlier identified as being labeled “Adult” includes sex beds, sex couches, sex kitchen counters, sex showers, beach scenes, hot tubs, pianos, cars, coffins, cages, cannons, sculptures shaped like anything from gargoyles to scorpions, and so on. Anything that can be made into a physical structure can be adapted for sex. The fact that avatars are embodied is entwined in the way that sexuality is expressed. Sex was by no means lacking in non-graphical virtual worlds like those Julian Dibbell describes in his writings on MUDs. But because there are avatar bodies in Second Life, there is a market for people who want to do something with them.

That said, how people choose to enact sexuality in Second Life is not limited to the use of animations. While it would be difficult to determine what is most common, it is safer to assert that virtual sex is performed in diverse ways. For instance, partners might not choose to use explicit poseballs while they make love in text or voice, but they might still undress their avatars and watch them cuddle on the screen while they verbalize much more sexual acts. Or they may be together casually inworld, flirting and seducing while clothed, using their avatars and the semiotics of avatar appearance to initiate, continue, and develop their attraction and interaction, but then log off and move the engagement to an outside platform like Skype or Yahoo!, where they may have accounts in their avatars’ names, to have voice or cam sex using software that is clearer-sounding and more reliable than Vivox (the software used for SLVoice). The choices, combinations, and preferences are nearly infinite.
What is notable about these examples for developing the concept of noncorporeal embodiment is that regardless of what is done with (or, when moving sexual activity to Skype, without) the body, the avatar is a reference point. It is a social mechanism. The existence of sex furniture can function the same way: the choice whether to use it or not is often a conscious one, verbally negotiated between partners, so that even when the choice is not to use it, the knowledge that it is possible to make avatars perform sexually on the screen is always present. The relationship between the user and his or her avatar is complex and resistant to generalization, though patterns are sometimes visible, as in the pattern that moves from more physical modes to more social/physical modes, a pattern that ties into the process of identity development similar to that found by Angela Thomas.

Sexual Subcommunities in Second Life

One of the most intriguing aspects of virtual space, where sexuality is concerned, is that it becomes possible to enact sexuality in ways that are simply not possible in real life. In some respects, this simply means taking advantage of the amorphous and imagination-driven physical environment. Float through outer space or canoodle under a fairy mushroom. Watch your avatar contort into more flexible positions than your yoga teacher could aspire to. But in other respects—when it comes to having a sense of noncorporeal embodiment—there’s more there than the passcode to a holodeck.

Sexual communities flourish in Second Life. Some have direct real life equivalents, such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities and all kinds of BDSM niches. They overlap as well, of course. People who socialize in these communities may do so because they’re searching for a similar virtual community to that which they have
in real life, because the real life version is not accessible to them, because the virtual kind allows them freedom to experiment, or for many other reasons. Whatever those reasons, it’s relatively easy to comprehend that someone might feel comfortably embodied in a virtual community of self-identified lesbians (for instance). The sexual orientation exists in real life and thus has some kind of familiar meaning to lesbians and non-lesbians alike. The virtual identity is open to real life lesbians and bisexual women, to (non-virtually) straight women who want to explore a woman-desiring side of themselves, to men who consider themselves “trapped in a lesbian’s body,” and to men who just want to see if they can convince lesbians to have sex with them (and who know they might risk having sex with other men with the same intentions). They all might be regarded in different ways by members of such communities and others in Second Life or real life who are not members of those communities, but the identity itself has meaning that shapes that regard.

For the purpose of this section, I would like to approach this topic through a discussion of immersion. Immersion has been tied dichotomously to the concept of augmentation in Second Life discourse since the concept pair was first presented by former Linden employee Henrik Bennetsen in 2006 and has been addressed by Second Life commentators and researchers since then. Roughly, immersionists view and experience Second Life as a self-contained context in which real life has little to no place, while augmentationists use Second Life as a supplement to or an extension of their real life activities. An example of augmentation Bennetsen uses in his essay is real life singer/songwriter Suzanne Vega’s 2006 concert in Second Life. While she was playing
inside a radio station, it was being broadcast inworld, where people could watch her animated avatar perform her songs. Vega’s real life identity was spilling over into Second Life as fully as was possible, and SL was simply a platform for her to perform the same songs she was performing for a radio audience. An immersionist example along the same lines might be a Second Life resident who performs live music inworld but does not tie her avatar identity to her real life one in any way. Maybe she uses SL as a world where she can live out a rockstar fantasy while earning a pedestrian living (or not) in real life.

Applying the models to sexuality and to the example of lesbian community I raised earlier, the augmentationist model might describe a real life lesbian who uses Second Life to meet women whom, perhaps, she would like to meet in real life at a later date. Meanwhile, the “man trapped in a lesbian’s body” can immerse himself in Second Life so that his real life body no longer matters (to him) in the ways he identifies socially and sexually to a virtual lesbian community, as an example of immersionism.

Augmentationism and immersionism represent hypothetical extremities of a spectrum along which users’ involvement with the virtual world may exist. As theory blogger (and real life university lecturer) Khoisan Fisher explains, it is an asymmetrical pair for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that immersionism cannot be carried to its most extreme form, in which the agent exists only in the metaverse, because the virtual identity relies on the existence of the actual one (2011). In the present discussion of sexual communities in Second Life, I will nonetheless be focusing on immersion, using augmentation only as an underlying counterpoint and a reminder that at
least for practical reasons immersion cannot be complete. That is, as I address immersion, I use it self-consciously as a relative and not absolute term.

What virtual worlds such as Second Life offer to people who are drawn to forms of sexuality for which the real life equivalents are uneasy at best is the opportunity for immersion into alternative physical or social contexts. My interest in addressing this topic was raised during one of my first interviews for the project. Bala had joined Second Life hoping she could use it to enact or expand her involvement in yaoi, which she explained was, “The Japanese word that describes male-male romantic relationships, mostly produced for the benefit of women.” Bala had been involved with a LiveJournal community of others interested in roleplaying young men engaged in romantic or sexual liaisons with one another. Yaoi exists as a genre of popular culture in Japan, with its themes appearing in anime and manga as well as in fan-circulated erotic fiction on the web. I had not heard of it prior to my conversation with Bala, but it was immediately evident how virtual worlds could provide fans another dimension of enjoyment in which they can embody the personae that they write or read about. Effectively, this means that real life women use virtual male avatars to engage in erotic relations in which they are openly aware of each other’s real life gender.

In an article published in Signs, James Welker discusses the emergence of yaoi in manga and anime of the 1970s, “just as women artists were taking over the shôjo [girls’ comics] market” (2006:841). It was thus being produced even then by female writers for a female audience, and he notes that while “the genre is widely considered to offer a liberatory sphere within which presumably heteronormative readers can experiment with
romance and sexuality through identification with the beautiful boy characters” (842), he also finds that “members of the Japanese lesbian community have pointed to boys’ love and other gender-bending manga as strong influences on them in their formative years” (843), pointing to an uncommonly pansexual breadth of identification. Welker indicates that yaoi was considered nonthreatening as an enticement toward homosexuality because it depicted boys’ love as a “passing phase” phenomenon and because it was marketed to girls. What the original yaoi artists may not have anticipated forty years ago would be the interactive aspect that the genre would take on a generation later, come the internet.

Bala rooted her involvement with yaoi in LiveJournal, a diary-esque blogging site with a notable roleplaying contingent. Although LiveJournal’s “popularity has dwindled in recent years, with the advent of first MySpace, then Facebook, and then Tumblr,” there is still a yaoi LiveJournal Community with a profile cautioning that the site may contain adult material. It would seem as though Second Life would be a logical extension of the text-based LiveJournal context for yaoi fans, as it would provide an immersive environment in which real life women such as Bala would be able to engage in romantic and sexual roleplay with other real life women, each of whom would embody a male avatar. A three-dimensional graphic context would be unique for sexual play of this kind, allowing corporeally female users to be as fully embodied as males, noncorporeally, as they could be in avatars of their own sex, for romantic and sexual activity.

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64 From the TV Tropes reference website, which also identifies roleplayers as a considerable subsection of active LiveJournal members (http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LiveJournal, accessed 29 February 2012).
As it happens, the yaoi community as such does not seem to be especially large or visible in Second Life, though Bala assured me that “there’s an enormous community of female roleplayers who take on male characters” in Second Life. Of that I have little doubt, as it is a fairly broad category when described in that way. However, of yaoi in particular, I have not encountered any mention or sign, before or since our interview in 2010, without intentionally seeking such groups or locations out. Even then they are few, which may be a consequence of yaoi’s focus on young adolescent boys, not prepubescent but often minors. The only kind of sexuality that is not permitted in Second Life is underage, and the internet distribution of yaoi itself has attracted concern in terms of circulation of child pornography (McClelland 2005). Though yaoi can involve older adolescents or young men, and Bala made it clear that it was her gender and that of her partner that aroused her about yaoi and not the ages being roleplayed, the ageplay concern could easily be sufficient to render yaoi less visible than some other sexual communities in Second Life could be. It is still an excellent example of the virtual context proving ideal for immersively enacting a sexuality that could not work precisely in real life.

A community with a much greater recognition factor in the virtual world—in fact many virtual worlds—is furry fandom. There is some overlap between furry fandom and manga/anime, as I discovered while researching yaoi, but the concept as it applies to the online culture I address (as with its corresponding offline culture) here is primarily a western one that grew out of science fiction conventions and related fanzines in the early
Furry is not a sexual community as such, in the sense that sexuality is not necessarily the main focus of all those who identify with it, but I address the implications of virtual furry sexuality for several reasons: 1) identification with an alternative form of embodiment is a central aspect of furry fandom, for sexual and nonsexual furries alike; 2) though evidence of how significant sexuality is to the community as a whole is mixed, the importance of sexuality to a subset of furry fans is apparent; and 3) virtual furry sexuality provides a useful illustration of how identification with a noncorporeal body can provide more immersive sexual opportunities for those who do identify with that side of fur.

The most general definition of a furry is someone who identifies with an animal identity or character in any of a range of ways: through creating and sharing furry art or illustrations (in some cases meant to represent themselves), participating in real life furry conventions, or interacting with other furry fans online (Rust 2001). Importantly, the animal imagery used is typically cartoonish and anthropomorphic, rather than realistic. For reference, one might visualize Bugs Bunny and not, for instance, Lassie. The role of embodiment in furry culture is mixed, as well, with one survey suggesting that in real life, the wearing of fursuits (mascot-like animal costumes) is not widespread, with only 21.1% opting for occasionally physically embodying the animals with which they identify (Osaki 2008:24). In contrast, in Second Life, embodiment as an anthropomorphic animal at least part of the time appears to be definitive of furry identity (Au 2008:27; 102).

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66 The Wikipedia article on Furry Fandom (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Furry_fandom) cites science fiction historian Fred Patten’s “Chronology of Furry Fandom,” published in Yarf! The Journal of Applied Anthromorphics 46 (1997), but all links to this journal, from Wikipedia and elsewhere, come up broken (Accessed 1 March 2012). It appears it is unavailable online and may be difficult to obtain in hard copy, but it is the source cited on a number of furry sites for this claim about the history of furry fandom.
Meadows 2008:40). There are practical reasons for not wanting to wear a fursuit in real life—for instance, one interviewee in documentary *Furries: An Inside Look* (Curt Pehrson 2010) compares it to “wearing a sofa”—while such reasons are not as pressing in a noncorporeal environment. Socially, too, furries themselves acknowledge that some aspects of the fandom are “a little weird” (Osaki 2008:27) and subject to considerable stigma in real life, while furries inworld are “a recognizable minority in SL,” “often the target of mockery” (Au 2008:77) but not enough so to deter an estimated 15,000 residents from owning furry avatars in 2006 (Au 2006). In other words, animal embodiment is more likely to be a regular part of day-to-day virtual furry life than to real life furry
identity. In other words, noncorporeal furry embodiment provides greater opportunity for immersion, including where sexuality is involved.

Virtual worlds offer the possibility for furry fans not only to swap imagery and stories in forums but also to build persistent identities or “fursonas” (Pehrson 2010). Early furry virtual worlds included the text-based FurryMUCK, begun in 1990, and the graphical world Furcadia, begun in 1996 (Boellstorff 2008:184). In Furries: An Inside Look, filmmaker Curt Pehrson interviewed a handful of attendees at a furry convention in Pittsburgh. Even among those interviewed in this real life context, most referred to involvement that spanned real life and online contexts, including platforms such as deviantART (an art-sharing website that fosters community by encouraging users to comment on one another’s work), Second Life, and Furcadia, as well as, non-specifically, “the internet.” In a 2008 survey of self-identified furries, 70.6% of respondents considered the internet to be “extremely important” to furry fandom, compared to 22.3% saying the same about conventions (Osaki 2008:22-23). The sense of a virtual component to furry identity is so strong that in one case in the film an interviewee who does not specifically describe being involved with furry fandom on the internet refers to the identity he adopts at conventions as his “virtual alter ego.” Another distinguishes between his “furry life” and his “real life,” in which attending furry conventions is part of the former, not the latter. This interviewee does indicate that he has an active online fursona in SL and other contexts, and interestingly it is this virtual identity with which his convention-going identity is more closely associated.

The study was conducted online, which may account for at least some of the difference.
I note this blurring of different realities in order to emphasize the privileging of the “virtual” in many individuals’ furry identities (even when the virtual corresponds with, rather than being distinguished from, the real). Some may feel a sense of social immersion within the convention community, but where sexual activity is concerned, there are physical constraints to the same sense of immersion that the virtual context may help to overcome. Although, as I have already stated, sexuality is not necessarily the reason for a person’s identification as a furry, it is nonetheless present enough for some people to have its own term: yiffing, which just means furry sex, whether on- or offline. Furthermore, some furries in real life use special toys for sex designed to make their corporeal anatomy appear more similar to the type of animal with which they identify. The fact that despite such implements one is constrained by one’s fundamentally human body might suggest that noncorporeal embodiment, for which that is not the case, is probably an appealing alternative for some. It is not hard to locations designed for furry-themed sexual activity in Second Life, like those with names like the “Yiff Lounge” and “Furs At Play.” Furries interviewed in Pehrson’s documentary contend vocally against the real life media image of furries as excessively sexual, but I found no evidence of equivalent concerns inworld; a furry subculture probably does not stand out that way within a virtual world that itself contends with a real life media image of excessive sexuality.

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69 An example of a site that offers such products is [http://yiffytoys.de/index.en.html](http://yiffytoys.de/index.en.html) (Accessed 1 March 2012).

70 Locations were found via inworld Second Life Search (1 March 2012).
Noncorporeal embodiment thus can be related to the practice of sexuality in world for furries in Second Life and allows some to take on a identify with embodiments that are only roughly represented in real life. Debra Ferreday, in her *Feminist Theory* article “Becoming Deer: Nonhuman Drag and Online Utopias,” suggests that “fantasies of becoming nonhuman queer the relationship between ‘human’ and ‘animal,’” in part by “reminding us that the human is always-already animal” (2011:219). Online contexts provide a way to practice this type of “nonhuman trans” or “nonhuman drag” (Ferreday uses both phrases) in much more flexible ways than are available offline and where being sexual in a particular way does not lead to the connotation that one’s community is somehow *more* sexual than those around it. Within the context of “nonhuman trans,” furry embodiment earns parallels with yaoi embodiment, most fully realized where reality is virtual and adherents can immerse themselves within a noncorporeally embodied sexuality without “wearing a sofa.”

Still another community that is visible for its particular sexual practices in Second Life and that I would suggest benefits from the opportunities a virtual world offers for greater immersion is Gor, but for very different reasons from yaoi and furries. This subculture is based on a series of twenty-nine erotic science fiction novels by John Norman that take place in a world loosely inspired by Greco-Roman aesthetics and history. The social structure in the books includes a caste of sexual slaves, most of them women. The philosophical underpinnings of Norman’s books hold that men are naturally dominant and women are naturally submissive but that modern culture and feminism have confused this basic order. Gorean roleplay is widespread enough that Tom
Boellstorff judged it “the largest BDSM community in Second Life during [his] fieldwork” (2008:162) and virtual worlds research Tjarma Sixma refers to it as “one of the most successful role-play themes in Second Life” (2008:5).

Figure 7: A Gorean man and woman in a Gorean weapons store. The woman’s profile says that the man behind her “owns” her. Though she is dressed relatively modestly, she wears a collar, and her default animation is this submissive kneeling position.

With regard to Gor and the concept of noncorporeal embodiment, I suggest a very different type of immersion is involved compared to the other sexual communities I have addressed. No gender changes are necessary to be involved in Gor, the persons involved
are human in body—rigidly so, as Gorean regions usually require use of human avatars (Meadows 2008:44)—and the proto-Roman settings are feasibly replicable in real life. That is, there are no physical impediments to the practice of Gor in real life that would seem to make the virtual world a more effective venue. However, there is the element of social structure. Whereas the broader category of BDSM encompasses a multitude of practices taking numerous forms with greater or lesser connection to a larger community, Gorean practice in Second Life revolves around a geographic contexts and hierarchical social structures upheld by strongly defined communities (Sixma 2008:5). In comparison to what Goreans are able to accomplish and create in virtual space, the establishment of Gor’s social structure within a large-scale actual-world context would be impractical (and, if understood as real and not roleplay, illegal because slavery is at its foundation). The virtual world allows entire civilizations of thousands of participants (Meadows 2008:33; Sixma 2008:5) to embody caste positions and practice forms of sexuality that have far fewer outlets in real life.

It is not impossible to practice Gor in the actual world. Journalist Julia Gracen interviewed Goreans who lived out both online and offline identities tied into the Norman mythology for her article on the subject in internet magazine Salon.com (2000; see also Boellstorff 2008:163), but to my knowledge there is no offline Gorean presence on the scale that exists in Second Life: the construction of Gorean civilizations is a virtual phenomenon. Gor in Second Life centers around themed regions with internal subcommunities and hierarchies. Participants adopt static character-like personae that define their relationships with others and with the social structure on the whole (Sixma
Sometimes these regional subcommunities interact with each other as warring or allied towns might, as “part of a networked subculture that stretches throughout Second Life” (7). Whereas for furries, involvement in the virtual furry community is defined by the use of an appropriate avatar, for Goreans it is affiliation with the existing social structure that identifies one as a Gorean; there are avatar-level obligations one must fulfill in order to correctly play one’s role within that community (using a human avatar, dressing appropriately for one’s role as a freeman, freewoman, or slave, etc.), but dressing like a Gorean does not make one a Gorean. Immersion means more than embodying the aesthetics of the identity, it means submitting oneself to an exhaustive set of rules for behavior and interaction that guide one’s social and sexual identity within the Gorean context (Sixma 2008:11).

Sixma distinguishes between “fantasy roleplayers” and “lifestylers” in Gor, where fantasy roleplayers enact or perform their roles; it is entertainment or recreation, and the same roleplayers could conceivably do the same in any other virtual roleplay context because the draw is to create stories or narratives with others. Lifestylers, in contrast, “experience their character as manifestations of themselves” (9) and frequently see Gor as “a way to express their sexual identity and conservative views on gender roles” (8). She applies the concept of immersion to the lifestylers as a way of contrasting them to the fantasy roleplayers, suggesting that they “have a highly immersive attitude towards their play and use immersion to interact intensely with players with a similar attitude” (9). Two aspects of how Gor is constructed support and reinforce the opportunity for immersion. One is the instituting of rules governing behavior and social structure. Some
of these rules are dictated by the Norman books and others by the prerogatives of the region owners. Rules differ by caste and by region. They address nearly every facet of community interaction, from the (un)acceptability of out-of-character chatter to conflict resolution to the minute and graphic details of the punishments to be inflicted on those who fail to abide by the rules (12). Although I do not take exception with Sixma’s distinction between lifestylers and fantasy roleplayers, the implementation of so many rules operating at various levels of interaction seems geared toward maximizing immersion and so I doubt whether the division between these types of participants remains distinct. I find it difficult to imagine how it would be possible to roleplay fluidly without internalizing adherence to these rules.

The other aspect of Gorean social structure that reinforces immersion within the community is the use of a “total power exchange” approach to the sexual relationships therein (Sixma 2008:8-9). In total power exchange in genera, “the BDSM interests are the basis of the entire relationship and are not limited to taking part in ‘scenes’” (8). In BDSM as a broader category, total power exchange is not a given, nor even especially typical, but may be negotiated by partners/participants. In Gor in particular, however, total power exchange and its element of “consensual non-consent” is definitive of the culture. Even if a female avatar begins roleplay as a freewoman, she does so with the awareness that there may be circumstances in which the rules of roleplay dictate that she be forced into sexual slavery (13). A Gorean is not just immersed in an avatar identity but in a cultural and sexual identity, as well.
Furthermore, this immersion is part of the experience of noncorporeal embodiment, as well. Although there is room for variation in the Gorean context (tribes of “panthers”—dominant women who keep male or female slaves—may exist on the margins of Gorean societies) and in Second Life (some Gorean offshoot communities enact variations on the Norman canon that a purist would deem heretical, such as single-sex subcommunities or even Gorean furries), the standard structure consists of extremely rigid gender stratification. Developed in the 1970s as a platform for John Norman’s personal views of gender relations (Gracen 2000), the Gor books reflect a fantasy environment put forth by one man but that has resonated with many other “lifestylers” on one level or another since then. These gender relations are performed through hypersexualized and heavily gender-normative avatars (Meadows 2008:31-2). When one roleplays a “kajira” (the word for a female slave) in a typical Gorean community, accepting the rules of the land and the collar around the neck, one is embodying a particular type of femaleness affecting how to dress, how to speak, how to move, down to the spread-legged kneeling animations and, in some cases, the master’s brand burned into one’s thigh (Sixma 2008:13-14). The fact that this occurs using avatars in a virtual context means that the physical identity of the man or woman behind the kajira is subsumed—that is to say, deeply immersed—within this embodied and enculturated identity. Returning, then, to this project’s central concept, it should be evident why a virtual space affords opportunities for noncorporeal embodiment within Gorean sexualities and sexual identities than are available to most people in the actual world.
Leaving Gaps

I would like to discuss the relationship between sexuality in these virtual subcommunities (yaoi, furry, Gor) and the concept of techne, as it is used by Tom Boellstorff in *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008). Techne is technology, technique, craft, and art, and is characteristic of the virtual human, where “virtual selfhood is becoming predicated on the idea that people can craft their lifeworlds through intentional creativity” (25). Virtual identity, when understood as a part of techne, is not just an identity lived but an identity created. Techne also represents gaps: when something is created, it is not just the product that exists where there was nothing before; there is also a gap between the product and the previous lack of the product that has come into being. The gaps between one’s virtual identity (or identities) and one’s actual one(s) are part of what makes up the former.

One notable aspect of the sexual sub-communities addressed here is that they all pre-exist Second Life as products of popular culture. They come from manga, anime, fan cultures, and science fiction/fantasy novels, and they precede SL as virtual identities, as well, with followings in fan fiction, Live Journal, bulletin board-style forums, and other areas of the internet. There is something about these pop culture phenomena that speaks to fans strongly enough that they do not only consume the cultural products but identify with them to the point of developing cohesive individual and collective identities around them. In the leap from cultural artifact that exists to be read or viewed to a hub of communal interest and the basis of identity construction is a visible process of techne. Those who participate in subcommunities inspired by popular culture actively create
selves in relation to the cultural contexts that pull the individuals together, and the reinforcement of that cultural context as a site for community and identity formation results in the establishment of a virtual community and, extended into a graphical domain, a niche in the virtual world. Simultaneously, these communities both allow and reinforce the particular types of embodiment that typify those who take part in them, so that the sexual self and the virtual body that expresses its desires (and, by implication, conducts the experiences back to a desiring and feeling human user) are indivisible.

A multiplicity of gaps is evident: between the actual human and her virtual counterpart(s); between cultural products as consumer products and cultural products as producers/sources of emerging (sub)cultures/communities; and between the participant’s role as consumer of the original product and as an active creator of its collectively maintained virtual expansion. Using Boellstorff’s view of the virtual as a nonphysical realm of interaction and being that exists alongside the physical one—exemplified as early as in Plato’s “allegory of the cave,” in which shadows on a wall constitute a group of prisoners’ virtual reality (2008:33-4)—the establishment of yaoi, furry, or Gorean identities, even when not contained within a specific forum, website, or grid, constitutes the establishment of a virtual social community.

When a virtual community gains a virtual space, such as in Second Life, however, there is room for even more collective creativity and craftsmanship and the accompanying gaps between what exists and what came prior. A virtual world provides a point of reference for members of a community to find each other and perhaps develop norms and aesthetics that further define what it means to be part of the community.
Identities can be constructed with relation to the whole, and the whole is shaped by its members. Most of this is possible for community members outside of the virtual world as well, but there is at least one aspect of this practice of techne that I suggest seems especially visible in a (mostly) free-form virtual world like SL. That is the displacement of the original pop cultural artifacts from providing the main point of departure for at least some individuals who identify with the community.

In other words, because Second Life (for instance) provides residents the opportunity to create their own virtual selves and communities without requiring them to adhere to a specific storyline or mythology, real (like the Sims Online) or imagined (like in World of Warcraft), there is room for existing communities to “move in,” in a sense, and establish their own spaces. Because infinitely multiple communities like these coexist, residents who enter the virtual world without a particular goal or social circle in mind can wander and explore not just geographically but socially as well. They can try on different roles and identities, shapeshifting regularly or settling into a particular niche. And the niche they might settle into is one of those based on pop cultural genres or products, but to these virtual world navigators, that origin is mere background. They might not have even heard of them before their first contact with members of the communities. What results is a virtual community that is capable of existing in and of itself, where its characteristics are created and perpetuated by its members, who have varying degrees of familiarity with and adherence to the source material. Techne produces a further gap between the creators of professionally published anime and manga featuring anthropomorphic animal-like characters, for example, and the broad world of
virtual furries. Or between John Norman and the Second Life kajira who buys silks and
echains and slave animations—or possibly even makes and sells these for others—without
ever having read a Gor novel and perhaps not planning to do so. To be more specific, the
gap is between the primary points of reference for the building of identity. Whereas for
some the points of reference are the original pop cultural sources, for others the point of
reference is the community itself, and that gap is the product of creation and technology,
an accomplishment of techne.

Boellstorff theorizes love in terms of techne in a way that I believe can apply
similarly to sexuality, writing, “Love emerges as a form of techne, of that distinct form of
human activity crafting a social world…. What operationalizes love in virtual worlds is
not knowing who someone is in the actual world, but crafting a relationship within the
virtual world” (166). Assuming it is necessary to know things about another person to
love him or her, or to experience an embodied sense of attraction toward him or her, is an
assumption tied to episteme/knowledge, rather than techne/creation. Boellstorff discusses
sexuality, as well, but not with respect to techne, and so I would like to associate those
two conceptually here, along with the themes of embodiment, identity, and virtual
community. Moving back to the examples of yaoi, furries, and Gor, these are
communities in which sexuality is either central or is performed in ways that lean on the
noncorporeal, in which the actual world body is more or less implicated as a site of
arousal in relation to virtual activities. Or to put it in terms of both techne and
embodiment, noncorporeal embodiments have the ability to give rise to collectively
understood and physically experienced sexual identities.
Chapter 4: Virtual Violence and Safety, Where Knowledge is Strength

This chapter was inspired by two occurrences that took place during my first year in Second Life. At the time of the first, I was very new, probably about a week old. I was wandering alone in a shopping mall, when suddenly a shadowy, demon-like figure swooped down from nowhere and attached itself to my avatar’s head. A droning noise began, with a heavy, robotic voice describing in three words over and over the obscene act I could view my molester performing on my skull. I tried what little I knew to shake him off and determined relatively quickly that he was not going to let go voluntarily. I shouted at him in text, I tried using gestures, I sat down because I had heard you should do that if you are griefed, I jumped, I walked into walls, but nothing would budge him, and my frustration only grew. The drone continued, heightening the panic and sense of urgency. I was pretty certain I could teleport away and be safe, but I believed that if I did that, then I might not be able to file a report against him. I also did not want to log out and give the griefer the satisfaction of having chased me off.

I took a deep breath and opened the mini-map, a small, localized map of the surroundings. I spotted a group of dots representing other avatars and started moving slowly toward them—slowly because it is difficult to move with someone humping one’s face—and asked, “Can anyone help get him off of me?” One of these, a bulky male avatar in modern-day military uniform, jumped at us and seemed to tackle the assailant.
The next thing I could tell for sure was that the griefer had attached himself to the
soldier’s face instead of mine; the repetitive noise continued from the pair’s direction.

One of the others said to me, “He’ll take care of it now,” and though I still wanted the
issue reported, I took this as my cue to go. Fingers still shaking, I fumbled through my
inventory to find a safe-sounding landmark and teleported off.

This was my first personal encounter with the phenomenon called “griefing.” This
term was reportedly coined at the turn of the century in the Usenet Newsgroup for
MMORPG Ultima Online but is used much more generally in various internet contexts.

Griefing in Second Life may target individuals or entire locations, may be personal or
impersonal, and can take any form that a creative person or group devises, though there
are certain kinds that appear more commonly. Griefing need not be performed by
strangers to the victim, but as we will see in the examples that arise in this chapter, this is

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71 “Griefer.” Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griefer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Griefer) (Last updated 16 April 2012; Accessed 17 April 2012). Though using Wikipedia as a source may seem questionable in some cases, I consider it a valid source for this kind of information. Internet terms like “griefer” and “griefing” developed through collective use in a social online environment. Similarly, when Wikipedia works well, it is through the collaborative participation of many authors narrowing in on a more or less agreed upon set of facts. That said, responsible use of Wikipedia as a source involves attention to the revision history. There I found at the time of this research that the last revisions involved a brief griefing of the “Griefer” article itself ([http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Griefer&diff=487629386&oldid=487629246](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Griefer&diff=487629386&oldid=487629246)). It was only two minutes before it was corrected, but a look through the full revision history actually reveals that vandalism like this occurs quite a bit on this particular page, usually with the perpetrator deleting the information and leaving other text in its place, which might be self-congratulatory or simply vulgar. Even though the misinformation is there temporarily, it can be effective at keeping editors busy, as when three contributors worked continuously to revert a griefer’s edits for several minutes straight (see the edits of 13 March 2012 at [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Griefer&action=history](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Griefer&action=history)). Furthermore, some of the text used in this vandalism refers to an entity called “Team Avolition,” apparently referring to members of a gaming forum—[http://www.teamavolition.com/](http://www.teamavolition.com/)—which, on its news page, casually includes a video depicting its members griefing a MMORPG called Minecraft ([http://www.teamavolition.com/page/index.html/?videos/minecraft-griefing-mikeland-survival-r40](http://www.teamavolition.com/page/index.html/?videos/minecraft-griefing-mikeland-survival-r40)) in between innocuous game reviews and news. To my knowledge, this group has no organized presence in Second Life, but this digression illustrates a few points about griefing: Griefing spans internet platforms, it may be conducted by organized groups (but also may not be) for whom the act of harassment is the point, while the platform is secondary, it takes many forms, and references to male anatomy are a common theme (in one of the Wikipedia revisions, the griefer had deleted an entire passage and replaced it with the word “peniss” [sic]). The common thread is that griefing is a deliberate attempt to harass.
the form that is referred to as griefing most often. I will be suggesting in what follows that griefing is what counts as “violence” in Second Life. It seldom looks like physical violence as we know it in the actual world, only infrequently taking the form of avatar-on-avatar battery and sexual assault (my own experience notwithstanding) or gun violence, all of which are more commonly roleplayed consensually in designated areas of the grid. It more closely resembles—and is described as—harassment of various kinds. As I seek to explain, however, Second Life’s embodied context influences the forms griefing takes and the ways in which it is experienced and responded to, as well as how it is gendered.

The second of the two key incidents can provide a framework for how I will approach the topic of gender. This one took place at the Virtual Praxis on Women in Second Life held on Minerva Island in the fall of 2008. After all the speakers had given their presentations, the group entered a closing discussion. The subject was griefing and safety for women; some shared personal anecdotes and others talked about teaching self-defense to women inworld. It was an interesting but not especially controversial discussion until one person, a female educator who teaches classes in Second Life, stated that she instructs her female students not to go to sandboxes because of the high risk of griefing there. I attempted to respond but did not get very far with her because I was trying to type while she was in voice, and the conversation was quickly moving forward. Although by that time the discussion had established that griefing could be a significant problem for new residents and could take specifically gendered forms directed at
women, it still seemed odd to me that women in particular should be told to restrict their mobility. For one thing, there is nothing in Second Life that would make a woman or female avatar less capable of responding to griefing attacks than are men or male avatars, provided she knows what to expect and what she can do. For another, the consequences of griefing are limited, particularly if one is aware of them: there is no physical pain or permanent damage, and there is no risk to one’s inworld possessions or account.

The educator’s advice to virtual female students reflected what women hear regularly in the actual world about where they should not go, what they should not wear, whom they should avoid speaking to, all to protect themselves against the risk of rape and other violence. The real life consequences of the advice include limiting women’s freedoms and pushing responsibility for incidents onto the women who transgress the advice, but there is nonetheless a grain of truth to it: rape is real, and it has real, embodied effects. The advice, however, is built on understandings (accurate or not) of physical bodies, such as the supposed vulnerability of the female body, due to its size relative to the male body and its limited (in many cases) capacity for resisting violence. These understandings have minimal applicability to Second Life, where avatars are equal in strength and where ability is determined by what one knows and not the size or sex of the body. I was surprised by the fact that someone at a feminist event would not only perpetuate this kind of advice but apply it to a virtual world where the “grains of truth”

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72 The category of “women” was not explained at the Praxis. For the most part it was treated as an unproblematic category, aside from in my own presentation, which formed the basis of the identity chapter in this dissertation.
relevant to the actual world would be moot. I was surprised, as well, that I was the only person there who questioned it out loud. In the three and a half years that have followed, I have not heard anyone else say they would tell women but not men to avoid sandboxes (though many have acknowledged that sandboxes are griefing zones and some recommend avoiding them in general), so there is little reason to believe that the educator’s view is a popular one. It nonetheless illustrates how actual world beliefs about sex and gender can filter into a virtual context, even when the embodied basis for those beliefs does not fit well. Examining how gender is dealt with in virtual space on the subject of violence and safety can be useful in helping feminists examine the beliefs that continue to apply to real world messages about women, men, and violence.

This chapter will address the concept of griefing in Second Life, along with its gendered and sexualized dimensions, how and whether it is experienced by residents in embodied ways, and how feminist theories of corporeal embodiment may be informed by examining violence experienced in a noncorporeal body. I hope also to contribute to thinking about how violence is discursively addressed in the real world and complicate the way the body is regarded with respect to gendered violence and safety.

Contextualizing Griefing

In a virtual world where physical harm can be simulated or represented but is not actual, the concept of violence requires a shift in mentality from what might commonly apply in the actual world. Feminist theories of domestic violence, among other kinds of violence, often incorporate definitions of violence that extend beyond bodily harm (e.g., Jones 1994:88, 90-91). In some cases, it is not the act itself that defines a situation as
violent but the social and/or personal context in which it takes place. It should not be difficult, then, to extend concepts of violence into virtual space, where the physical body is relatively safe, but one’s security and wellbeing in other respects are less so. I will begin this chapter by contextualizing some of the forms of violence that one might encounter in virtual space.

Although the terms “griefer” and “griefing” would probably be recognized by most experienced residents, Second Life’s official sources of information say very little about them. The Second Life wiki only defines griefing as “a term which applies to activities designed to make another player’s life or experience in Second Life unpleasant” and a griefer as “a name for a Second Life resident who harasses other residents.” The latter page links to more information on griefing in Wikipedia, to the Second Life Terms of Service (as a whole—no particular section), and to guidelines for filing an Abuse Report against another resident. As noted, the concept of griefing precedes Second Life and applies to a range of activities that may be used in virtual worlds on the whole, or in certain kinds of them, and not just in SL. In fact, the Wikipedia article frames griefing within the context of online games, making many of the examples of griefing given in the article inapplicable to all or most areas of Second Life because it is not in itself a game.

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73 Second Life Wiki. “Griefing.” http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Griefing (Last updated 7 August 2008; Accessed 3 April 2012); Second Life Wiki. “Griefer.” http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Griefer (Last updated 19 August 2009; Accessed 3 April 2012). The fact that the word “player” is used instead of “resident” in the “Griefing” definition suggests further that this page has not received much attention since it was written, as Linden Lab’s materials are normally very precise about the terminology used to refer to residents.


75 “Stealing other players’ items and/or experience,” for example, has no direct Second Life equivalent. Arguably, the nearest comparison might be intellectual property violations, which I have seldom heard referred to as griefing.
Nonetheless, a variety of griefing techniques have developed in Second Life that are specific to its platform and the ways in which griefers perceive both users and the system itself to be vulnerable.

Two Second Life-related pages that provide more information on dealing with such issues are a user-written wiki page by fr43k Paine ([sic.]: she spells her name with a lower-case f) and a Second Life Knowledge Base page by Rand Linden on “How to deal with abuse and harassment,” which uses the term “griefing” several times as a rough equivalent of “abuse” and does not explain it separately. The Linden page identifies several kinds of abuse and harassment, but more attention is paid to how to stop it than what defines it. For instance, there are sections on “If you are being physically pushed inworld” and “If you are being animated,” with suggested ways to respond but no context or indication of what might actually push or animate the resident. The page does not go into great detail but provides some basic useful information. Fr43k Paine’s user page on “Dealing With Griefers” is out-of-date with respect to its information on viewer controls and some of the forms of griefing described, but she and her co-authors acknowledge the prevalence of griefing, describe a number of different kinds in detail, and explain how to escape or neutralize attacks, and those parts of the page remain accurate. The kinds of

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76 Rand Linden. “How to deal with abuse and harassment.” Second Life Knowledge Base. [http://community.secondlife.com/t5/English-Knowledge-Base/How-to-deal-with-abuse-and-harassment/tap/1339983](http://community.secondlife.com/t5/English-Knowledge-Base/How-to-deal-with-abuse-and-harassment/tap/1339983) (Last updated 10 February 2012; Accessed 10 April 2012). Linden Lab has maintained documentation on the web in a couple of different forms: a closed wiki (meaning, only staff can edit it) and the Knowledge Base. The two sets of informational pages are similar—both provide explanations for a variety of topics—but the Knowledge Base’s format is more streamlined and is more conducive for effective illustrations. Much of the wiki material has been shifted to the Knowledge Base since it started to be developed, but links to the wiki still exist for older topics. In this case, the wiki pages on griefing/griefers do not link to the Knowledge Base page.

acts that are covered on these two pages can provide an introduction to what may constitute griefing to a Second Life resident, Linden hinting that one might find oneself pushed or animated, but also harassed or scammed, or that one might be grieved by invisible objects that require advanced tools to locate and eliminate them. In addition to this, Paine moves this information into the active voice, identifying what users might be pushed or animated by: “cages,” “orbiters,” “deformers,” “blitzers,” as well as where they can be used and what one should look out for. It also discusses certain kinds of griefing, like extortion and intimidation, that do not focus directly on an avatar’s body but on the user’s vulnerability through lack of contextual social knowledge, and explains how to tell the difference between certain kinds of roleplay and scamming. In some cases, these may indirectly implicate the avatar’s body via lack of knowledge, such as when griefers with guns threaten to kill the victim if he or she does not pay money or otherwise comply with demands. Although the avatar cannot die permanently (and cannot “die” even temporarily in most locations), the new resident might not know that and submit to

Griefing has its own culture and its own jargon, some of which is arcane even to the average Second Life non-griefer. Caging and deforming are roughly what they sound like: rezzing cages around or deforming the shape of an avatar. Orbiting was a word it took me a year or so inworld to pin down, but it involves pushing the avatar high into the sky, e.g., as if in orbit (if the grid were globe-shaped, which it is not), at which height it may or may not fall. Blitzing was new to me at the time of this research but is, as Paine explains it, similar to orbiting but with the added effect of potentially disabling worn scripts, in some cases permanently. Thus the long-term impact, in real world terms, would be the destruction of personal property. In one of my interviews, I learned that the technological loophole griefers were exploiting with blitzing has been long since closed by Linden Lab, so this is actually an obsolete practice (interview with Io).
convincingly delivered demands.

Figure 8. The kind of cage that might be used either by griefers or in play. Name tags were visible in the picture and have been removed.

The degree to which the Linden page is victim-focused is most evident in contrast with Paine’s page. Aside from his instructions on how to mute or AR (file an Abuse Report on) a griefer, the Linden page renders griefers themselves invisible, almost theoretical, focusing instead on what to do in the aftermath and very little on what to look out for. The only prevention strategies offered concern setting land rights on one’s own parcel or region, information Paine provides as well (and more thoroughly). The pages are, of course, written with slightly different purposes in mind: the Linden page is
presented in numerical points, easily skimmable, with concise instructions, while Paine’s is more like an essay. They also present very different impressions of the centrality of griefing in the lives of Second Life residents, but that is something that varies from resident to resident as well. Although it is more sparse, the Linden page is all that many people are likely to ever need. Paine’s information seems more geared toward empowering users to recognize griefing, not just report it or react in minimalistic ways. She includes a number of forms of griefing that the average resident may never actually encounter and, in doing so, provides a more complete impression of the ways in which griefers can use technological and cultural awareness (or, to be more accurate, a lack of such awareness on the part of potential victims) to engage in harassing and abusive conduct.

Several of the kinds of griefing addressed by Paine in particular highlight the vulnerability of the avatar body. Because the Second Life platform limits these vulnerabilities as compared to real life, griefers seeking to act on other avatars’ bodies must locate knowledge-related loopholes. Some griefer implements\textsuperscript{79} can restrict avatars’ bodies or cause them to be transported or deformed. Foreknowledge alone does not necessarily prevent these attacks, but it can greatly minimize frustration if such attacks occur, and as a number of commentators note (e.g., Dibbell 2008, as well as interview participants such as Hunter, Greer, Ainsley, and Io), many griefers are primarily

\textsuperscript{79} Depending on the context, the same objects can be considered tools, toys, or weapons, so I am using a more neutral term here that can cover any of these uses. For example, I am now in possession of a copy of the very head-humping “weapon” that was used against me at one time. It was given to me in a playful context, in which the intent would be to use it on friends as an annoying sort of toy. One interviewee, Greer, said he had had that toy for years, and it had never occurred to him to use it for griefing. Another, Io, said that she had seen it used for griefing quite frequently.
interested in eliciting a reaction. Often, a griefing attack that the victim responds to quickly and without feeding the griever an excessively emotional reaction will thwart the sense of victory and satisfaction the griever sought. Paine’s very first suggestion—“rule #1”—is to stay calm. “But why stay calm? Because it spoils their fun. They’re looking for a reaction, so they get bored if you just stay calm,” she advises. When one’s noncorporeal bodily integrity is threatened, therefore, the more one knows about the implements being used and the limits of their effectiveness, the more capable one will probably be to stay calm in practice.

Deformers can provide an example. If an avatar wears or interacts with a deforming object unintentionally, it can distort the avatar’s body beyond simple repair.80 To see one’s avatar stretched or squished or otherwise contorted can lead to distress and panic. As I have discussed earlier, the avatar is the user’s visual representation of her or his identity and is the conduit she or he uses for interacting with and experiencing the virtual world. To lose control over its use or its parameters without intentionally giving permission may not have the same physical effects as such loss of control would have in the actual world, but the emotional response falls at its own end of the same spectrum. This is the kind of experience that illustrates the saliency of noncorporeal embodiment. Remaining calm in the midst of such an attack is possible, of course, but the reminder to do so is important enough that Paine made it rule #1: first there is the gut reaction, the embodied immediate response that the initial attack brings about while one is fully

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80 By “beyond simple repair” I mean that it may take some work on the victim’s part to bring it back to normal, but it can be done. At worst, a victim’s avatar could be controlled by an object in the region, in which case he or she may find the problem returning any time he or she enters that location (until the object is gone or its script is reset). Anywhere else, however, the avatar should be fine.
immersed in one’s usual or habitual activities and mindset, and then there is the reminder to reorient that mindset when an instance of griefing interrupts that immersion and threatens the expected linkage between the user and the avatar that provides that sense of embodiment.

Grieving as Boundary Act

The internal process that occurs when one is making the effort to maintain calm in the face of attack supports an observation made by some on the topic of griefing, that it is about calling attention to the fact that the internet is not real and thus does not have to be taken seriously. As Julian Dibbell explains, “it’s the philosophy summed up in a regularly invoked catchphrase: ‘The Internet is serious business,’” a phrase meant to be read as a reminder that “being mocked on the Internets [sic] is, in fact, the end of the world,” that is, meant to be read ironically. “It encodes two truths held as self-evident by [griefers]—that nothing on the Internet is so serious it can’t be laughed at, and that nothing is so laughable as people who think otherwise” (Dibbell 2008). It hits hardest when it occurs while one is fully immersed in the “illusions” that the virtual world platform is meant to evoke within a type of reality.

When virtual real estate mogul Anshe Chung was being interviewed inworld by a CNET technology website reporter in 2006, she and the interviewer, GreeterDan Godel, were enacting an actual world-style scenario (a talk show interview) in a virtual context. Both are individuals whose real life identities (Ailin Graef and Daniel Terdiman) are public and yet they were using their avatars to communicate with each other and with “viewers” who might have been watching on inworld TV sets, in the live studio audience,
or on the web. Virtual space was constructed as a legitimate context for engaging in a practice informed by and fashioned after real life analogs, and to Second Life residents, this is completely normal. When the interview was interrupted by a teeming flock of giant pink penises floating across the stage, the illusion of normality was broken (Jardin 2006). If Chung, Godel, the camera operator, and the in-studio audience thought they were conducting “serious business,” this would have snapped them back to “reality,” so to speak. An attack like this requires a split-second recontextualizing of the situation, forcing the victims to break out of the roles they were immersed in to attend to and end the problem before being able to return to their original point of focus. As I discussed in the previous chapter, developing a sense of immersion can lead to approaching virtuality with a heightened sense of embodiment in one’s avatar and in one’s social and physical context. Degrees to which users are immersed in their roles vary, though, as does the facility with which different people may jump in and out of their preferred roles and the roles that an incident of griefing requires them to adopt.

In this particular example, Chung and Godel’s bodies were not threatened so much as were their contextual roles and their virtual space, and in fact much griefing targets space rather than individuals (or spaces belonging to individuals). In our interview, Bala discussed griefing in terms of the blurring of first and Second Lives and putting a lighter spin on the topic. “I kinda like the griefers,” she said. “I laughed my ass off when one of my friends posted on Plurk\(^1\) that Caledon\(^2\) got re-terraformed\(^3\) by

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\(^1\) Plurk is a micro-blogging social networking site with a large presence from Second Life. Like Twitter, posts must be no longer than 140 characters per line, but the format differs to allow more linear conversation threads.

\(^2\) A Victorian historic-themed estate comprising a number of subthemed regions.

\(^3\) by
griefers.” The people who had to take the time to return the land to the way it was would probably not have been laughing, but, turning more theoretical, she explained why this amused her:

Griefers reveal the permeability of SL; griefers remind us that we’re just pretending that the metaphors of this space correlate to RL. Once, [a friend] sent me a box for Valentine’s Day. I opened it up, and enormous physical hearts poured all over my skybox, filling it up, then spilling onto the sim below. We were picking that shit up for weeks. I loved it, though. It was proof that I was in a magical land instead of a boring one that was trying to be just like real life. (Bala, interview)

As Bala’s anecdote emphasizes, there may be merit in taking the griefers’ caution to heart not to take the virtual world too seriously. If, in fact, one laughs along with one’s griefers, it may in some cases defuse their intent to spark a reaction. There are times, however, when laughing at the griefer’s hijinks may not be as suitable a response. For instance, Bala is most amused by the griefer’s ability to force residents out of the comfort zone of real life mimicry. “If you expect to experience Second Life as a place much like your first life then you’re setting yourself up for failure because there are completely different rules,” she notes, before explaining that it is these expectations that she enjoys seeing thwarted: the expectation that your land will not change shape when your back is turned, that a box of fixed size will contain a finite number of objects, that if a television talk show is beset by problems, they will not include flying phalluses, and so on. Griefing incidents in Second Life, however, do not isolate themselves to instances where residents expect the virtual world to behave like the actual world. On the contrary, they may also take place when residents are fully immersed in contexts that can only exist virtually.

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83 Terraforming involves shaping the land to create hills, valleys, slopes, etc.
There, too, as I have mentioned, precisely what makes the act of griefing jarring is the demand for recontextualization in order to attend to the incident. In this case, it is not the intrusion of reminders that Second Life is not real life but quite the reverse, the intrusion of real life into an immersive Second Life experience. In either case, the boundary is blurred and threatened. Gaps (in Boellstorff’s terms) are crafted.

Another key reason why griefing cannot always be excused for serving as a reminder not to take Second Life too seriously is that it frequently occurs to users too new to have been enculturated into Second Life at all and thus have not necessarily reached a point of establishing for themselves real life-inspired habits. Brand new residents are learning how to walk, find their inventory, and use their cameras and sometimes voice. That is, they do not yet know how to function, much less have a philosophic sense of what Second Life is to them. When griefers target new residents, the ironic “Internet is serious business” justification does not hold; as new resident mentor Hunter noted in our interview, at that point griefers are “looking for a reaction,” and they are more likely to get one out of naïve “newbs” who do not yet know the limits and abilities of their avatars’ bodies and are more likely to be frightened by threatening scenes. He described a memorable incident “when two avatars played out a beating/murder on a new resident gateway. They used animations and rezzing to do it. One av chased the other around and beat on them with a baseball bat; effects included blood, and the beaten avatar wound up laying ‘dead’ on the ground. It looked quite realistic and did scare some newbs.” Although this incident did not directly implicate the spectators, it left new residents in fear for their own safety, giving them a sense of
embodied vulnerability before they had even grown accustomed to their noncorporeal bodies. Hunter tried doing damage control by reassuring them that the incident was staged, that most of what they had seen could not take place without the victim’s active participation, but “a few of them wanted to call the SL police” even so.

Were there even Second Life police to call for this? “I think there have been ‘unofficial’ police forever in SL, but they really have no authority,” Hunter explained. Paine’s user wiki page says much the same thing but also warns the reader not to be led on by such groups, indicating that their presence may not always be innocent roleplay: “Do not trust the ‘SL Police’ groups. It’s a scam! They don’t have real powers in SL. It doesn’t matter what they say or wear. Most newbies are impressed because they have uniforms or even weapons.” Hunter went on to explain further why the impression had developed: “They assumed that since SL is not strictly a game, which was one of the things we taught them first, that there was some sort of ‘police,’ and it didn’t help that one of the locals was wearing a police uniform.”

From start to finish, the grieving incident plays havoc with the new residents’ perception of reality during their formative first day inworld, coloring their understanding of even helpful or neutral information they had already gathered. They extrapolate the reinforced knowledge that Second Life is not a game and apply it to a beating and murder right before their eyes and to the presence of an individual in police uniform. Such a scenario can have a significant influence on these new residents’ perception of what avatar embodiment means and to give them a greater sense of mortality than is actually applicable. It can push a particular understanding of how real life and Second Life
compare or interact with each other, perhaps supporting, rather than challenging, the idea
that “The Internet is serious business.” Carried out amid seasoned residents, such a
scenario would more likely pose this kind of intellectual challenge to the spectators who
take their day-to-day Second Lives for granted, in addition to either entertaining or
annoying them or possibly both (or, if conducted in a combat region, passing completely
unnoticed). There is a tradeoff between being thrown out of a habit-bred comfort zone
and being subjected to fear. “I have no doubt,” says Hunter, “they did it to scare newbs
and get a reaction.” That tradeoff hinges on one’s comfort and familiarity with the world,
with one’s avatar, and with one’s ability to function in both as one wishes.

Unfortunately, helpers cannot teach new residents everything at once. I asked
Hunter how much focus there is on teaching new residents basic protective information.
“In my opinion not enough,” he answered. “Then again most newbs are not concerned
about it enough to care. They are more concerned with getting their appearance sorted out
and finding out what they can do in SL.” Hunter’s experience suggests that new residents
are distinctly aware of their embodiment when they enter Second Life, to the point where
they prioritize avatar appearance over safety. This is not necessarily impractical, as
appearing to be less of a “newb” can itself be protection from these particular types of
griefing (Cremome 2010).

Although appearance can be a buffer against some grieving, it does not make one
immune. New residents are the most common individual targets of grieving according to
most of the sources I consulted for this chapter, but prominent individuals occasionally
become targeted based on their prominence itself, as the Anshe Chung example
Figure 9. A new resident (left) being helped by a more experienced resident at a welcome area.

illustrates. It can become a boastful point on the griefers’ part to exploit vulnerabilities of those who have been in Second Life long enough to be prepared. The griefing of locations (rather than specific individuals) in general is often indiscriminate with respect to the age or status of the targets. Presidential candidate John Edwards set up a Second Life campaign headquarters in 2007 in anticipation of the 2008 election. The building was promptly vandalized with obscene objects and posters of Edwards in blackface.
by a group of griefers called the Patriotic Nigras (Cabron 2007). Nonetheless, even low profile locations can draw griefers merely because there are people there. Each respondent to this topic on the blog and most interview participants mentioned having been at events that were grieved at some point or another. As long as someone with the proper parcel, region, or estate rights is present when such an incident occurs, it can usually be ended swiftly, with the perpetrator(s) ejected and banned from the property.

This form of grieving—against location randomly chosen because it is populated—returns the discussion to the aspect of grieving that pulls victims out of their zones of complacent immersion and goads a response. I would like to briefly address how griefing as a boundary act plays out on the body of the avatar before moving into a discussion of the racial and sexualized aspects of some common griefer tactics. The internet in general and virtual worlds in particular have been discussed in terms of their capacity to create borderlands or boundary areas or to be these spaces themselves. Just to scratch the surface, virtual worlds have been identified as spaces to examine boundaries between play and pedagogy (Savin-Baden 2010), between work and play (Blodgett and Tapia 2010), between protest and entertainment (ibid.), between different cultural communities (Kotowski & dos Santos 2010), and of course between “real” and virtual worlds (Schultze and Orlikowski 2010). Naturally, the construction of different sides of these boundaries as mutually exclusive has come under critique, as well (Lehdonverta 2010). When I (following Fink 2011) refer to griefing as a boundary act, it is to suggest

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that it calls attention to how constructing real life and Second Life as strictly dichotomous is problematic.

Earlier I addressed how some griefers have exactly this as their goal, or so they claim. In doing so, I noted that it is likely to affect new residents and experienced residents in different ways. The varying responses that newer or more seasoned residents may exhibit to griefing illustrate the process of developing a sense of noncorporeal embodiment. While I do not wish to imply that a “new” and “old” resident dichotomy can be firmly divided, certain patterns appear in griefing anecdotes. Though Second Life residents even of very long standing vary widely in their knowledge of self-defense against griefing, I would suggest that simply being more comfortable in one’s own skin can facilitate the ability to respond to griefing when it occurs, not unlike how an experienced driver can leave to “instinct” what a new driver must make an effort to concentrate on and can thus react more readily in an accident, even if she has never had an accident before. When one is just developing a sense of noncorporeal embodiment—that is, only beginning to adjust to having an avatar and investing one’s identity into it as a representation of the self—a threat to that body’s integrity would be at that point the most distressing. Just as the new resident is beginning to feel a sense of control over her body, she loses that control. Although the number of participants in this research is small, and generalizations should not be overstated, griefing attempts that targeted the body (e.g., via deformers or the head-humper I fell victim to) were seldom carried out on seasoned residents among either blog or interview participants, while a few experienced it when they were new. Whether by coincidence or not, this study’s
participants did not report incidents involving loss of control of the body taking place at an age (in Second Life time) when they were secure in their embodied identities.

Griefing and Embodiment

Among the kinds of grieving that may affect individuals at all ages is one theme in particular that would more accurately be termed disembodied than embodied. Specifically, the disembodied penis plays a remarkably consistent role in grieving imagery. The previously noted Anshe Chung incident is but one example. Hunter said that particle penises were “a popular attack, especially on PG sims.” Greer offhandedly referred to “some little punk” who “comes to a sim and decides to throw out particle rezzers and giant flex penises” as a prototypical location griefer. Multiple contributors to a 2006 discussion thread in the Second Life forum archives on gender and grieving include penis imagery in their hypothetical examples, for instance, of “‘shoot-em-up’ griefers who strap on a cage gun and a giant penis” before embarking on their task. In fact, the penis cliché is the apparent referent evoked by the original poster, who ponders whether all griefers are male, noting, “You never seem to see a woman wearing a huge vagina attachment in a PG area.” Penile imagery is so closely associated with virtual grieving that a real life incident in which Russian chess grandmaster and political figure Garry Kasparov was attacked during a speech by a remote control penis prompted one reporter describing the incident to begin, “We had to double check that this wasn’t a story

85 In some of the examples, the penis is technically attached to the avatar using it, but I would suggest that even then, its use in grieving is not—as seemed to be the case in the previous chapter’s freenis discussion—to make the man feel more embodied but to contribute to the shock value attached to the imagery. Thus, even an attached penis is not necessarily an embodied penis.

Most people I have spoken with relay the distinct impression that most but not all griefers are male in real life, whether they come from organized griefing groups or are working solo. The two interview participants who frequented new resident welcome areas to assist new residents, Hunter and Ainsley, both independently asserted that most of the griefers they heard on voice were male, even, Ainsley suggested further, those who used female avatars. Io distinguished between trolls (“Usually trolling in SL is done by verbally pissing someone off,” she specified; it is not just being argumentative but deliberately trying to get a rise out of the other person) and griefers, saying, “If you go to any of the hangout areas in SL, you’ll see probably a 75% men to 25% women ratio who troll. However, of the griefers who actually attack people with weapons and things… I think must be near 99% [male].” Some characterize griefers not just as male but as boys, such as Greer, who believes griefing “happens when teenage boys are bored and feel like they don’t have anything else to do with their time.”

There is far less consistency in impressions regarding who is griefed in terms of gender, however. Although some research suggests that female avatars are more likely than male avatars to be targeted for griefing (Cremorne 2010), and Ainsley’s experience bears that out, other research finds no significant difference (Coyne, et al. 2009), and Io and Hunter both reported that gender is a poor predictor of potential victimization. The discussion at the 2008 Praxis that inspired me to investigate the gendered nature of

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87 Both references appear on technology sites where readers might be familiar with virtual worlds but are not necessarily involved in them.
inworld violence was premised on the contention that the griefing of women required particular attention. Different people’s experiences and the interpretations thereof may actually diverge, as could personal definitions of griefing. One distinction that occasionally does get mentioned is that female avatars are highly likely to be the subject of unwanted and often crude sexual advances. Both Ainsley and Io thought to mention this while discussing gender and being the target of griefing. For Io, it was worth mentioning but clearly something apart from griefing for her:

I honestly can’t say that women get targeted a significant amount more than men, even in sandboxes. HOWEVER, let me append something… In SL we all have the anonymous factor. And women do get targeted with sexual advances a LOT. Many very inappropriate and rude advances. Generally speaking men can be absolute pigs towards women in SL. But in regards to griefing I really haven’t seen any significant difference. (Io, interview)

For Ainsley, sexual harassment was not necessarily separate from griefing; rather, it was something that could change in meaning depending on the resident’s time inworld and overall outlook: “I mean, some guy can wander up to me with a giant penis attached to him and start IMing me about having sex, and I don’t even care anymore. Day one, I would have been gone.” She also describes a friend whose female avatar is “Rubenesque, shall we say. Not some skinny mini. And she really doesn’t care about what her avatar looks like in any huge way. She wears edited (barely) newbie hair, etc. But it is deliberate. Anyway, she gets harassed as often as me, but with her it’s almost always about how ‘fat and ugly’ she is.”

Incidents like these likely skirt the line between what would generally be considered griefing and what would not, and some might regard it as “trolling” instead if the harassment is intentional (that is, if the approach is not a poorly executed attempt to
simply hit on a woman). Notably, placing sexual harassment without the use of weapons into this grey area could affect differences in whether residents perceive women to be griefing targets as often as or more often than men (I have not come across a source suggesting men are griefed more). Because it might have a bearing on how women choose to present themselves and on their sense of noncorporeal embodiment, though, it is relevant to the present discussion. I cannot know whether it is the kind of harassment the educator at the Praxis had in mind when warning women away from sandboxes, but it introduces another angle on harassment and embodiment. In real life discourses about victimization and rape, the instruction to women to avoid going certain places alone goes
hand in hand with the message that if they choose to dress provocatively, they are “asking for” any response they get. How much of a role, then, does appearance play in self-protection strategies in a context where one can not only dress however one likes year round but can change gender, size, or species at will?

The evidence suggests that the answer is: potentially, quite a bit, but in practice, hardly any at all. Ainsley’s experiences and those of her friend led her, around the time of our interviews in 2010, to ponder adopting a male avatar for when she is at infohubs (new resident areas and therefore griefing zones), but she never followed through with it, partly because “I think people are more likely to accept help from a female avatar.” Two years later, she has changed her mind about considering this an option (personal communication). Changing appearance for the purpose of safety and protection comes up as advice in anti-griefing resources, as well. A list of “30 (and More) Things Every Newbie Should Know Before Starting Second Life” addresses ways to protect oneself from various kinds of grieving, harassment, and exploitation, as well as offering some general practical suggestions. Tip #7 reads:

Ladies, be aware that choosing a female avatar will make men gravitate toward you, even on Help Island just seconds after you arrive in Second Life. It can be unnerving to try to learn a whole new online experience with some guy insistently chattering to you and asking you where you’re from, what your real name is, etc. Two ways to avoid this are: simply tell him to go away, and to pick a male avatar when you first register…. Having a male shape will enable you to get through those first few hours without feeling hassled (Tigerpaw 2009).

Similarly, a page on “SL Safety Basics” presented by the Women’s Resource Hub in Second Life suggests, “If you have some reason to stay in an area where you are being harassed, you may with to change your appearance,” and illustrates the point with an
image of a small male avatar transforming into a large robot, with the words, “All done. Scary” (Brewster 2009).

Changing appearance to avoid or minimize harassment is a familiar option, but it appears to be one that residents are reluctant to take advantage of. Aside from Ainsley’s temporary (and ultimately unrealized) weighing of the option, no participants in either blogs or interviews said they would use that strategy. As Hunter noted, sorting one’s appearance is often the first thing new residents do when they enter Second Life. As I discussed in Chapter 3, it can sometimes take the form of male avatars looking for a freenis to complete their sense of maleness. Finding a non-default appearance or at least customizing what they have to look less cookie-cutter is the first project many new users take on. I would argue that having enough comfort with one’s avatar to change it on a whim for a reason other than increasing one’s own identification with it is something that is more likely to come with time, that new residents—the ones most likely to find protection in such a strategy—are actually those least likely to feel comfortable with using it. As with griefing acts that take place against the body of the victims, such as deformers,orbiters, or animations like the one performed on me years ago, it is a matter of one’s embodiment not being compromised, even voluntarily, during the critical phase when one is trying to gain a sense of noncorporeal selfhood.

The likelihood of being griefed due to the appearance of one’s avatar, as well as the unlikelihood of changing one’s avatar to avoid it, is especially applicable where furries are concerned. Furries are recognized as a common target population of at least some organized griefing groups, as Dibbell (2008) notes and interviewees such as
Ainsley and Hunter confirm. As I covered in the previous chapter, identification with the furry community hinges around the furry appearance, so that although some people wear furry avatars only some of the time, and while furries fall along a spectrum of animal imagery that also includes nekos, ferals, and tinies, there is nonetheless a core concept that defines what being furry entails. That core concept seems to become a griefing target. Furries have—not uncontroversially—been compared to an ethnic minority within Second Life. Though there are important differences between “role playing something that doesn’t even exist in real life” and “living the experience of racism 24/7,” as one forum contributor puts it, the strength of one’s identification with one’s avatar—and the social meaning and connections attached to it—can make transforming not because one’s identify has shifted but in order to avoid discrimination or grieving a significant compromise to a sense of selfhood. Another contributor to the same discussion adds that, “those of you who say that an avatar is only an aspect of dress like a suit or tie may not understand the depth to which some of us identify with our inworld appearance, whether humanoid or not, and asking us to choose a different avatar is identical… with asking us not to be ourselves.” Although the discussion is not about grieving, it gets to the heart of how identity may be wrapped up in noncorporeal embodiment to the point where recommending that one choose a different appearance as a protection strategy could potentially be as threatening to the sense of self as grieving itself.

It may be a point of debate how much like a racial or ethnic minority it is to be a

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88 An extensive discussion of nonhuman discrimination in the Second Life forums that stretched from March through August 2010 is an example of such references and such heated discussion of the comparison: [http://community.secondlife.com/t5/General-Discussions/Discrimination/td-p/134681](http://community.secondlife.com/t5/General-Discussions/Discrimination/td-p/134681).

89 See Scylla Rhiadra’s comment on the first page of the above Community Forum thread.

90 See Eternus Soulstar’s comment on page 3 of the above forum thread.
furry or a member of any other inworld community, but real life racism is not an uncommon theme in Second Life griefing. As noted earlier, some of the vandalism performed on John Edwards’s campaign materials depicted the then-Senator in blackface. A well-known group of griefers, the Patriotic Nigras, routinely carry out their attacks while wearing dark skins, Afros, and suits. The choice of avatar is not guided by their real life identities—“it’s clear that few, if any, PNs are in fact African-American” (Dibbell 2008)—but by the expected impact of their concerted appearance. 91 Interview participant Io, who has had many griefers as friends as well as enemies, drew the line when a friend was part of a group that raided the Africa sim in KKK garb. She had a high tolerance for some forms of griefing behavior but found this choice of approach distasteful and cut off that friendship in great disappointment. I was once at an event visited by a lone avatar in a dark skin named Obama, who soon began IMing overtly vulgar and obscene messages to women and, when called out on it, moved into expressing a stream of accusations of racism and anti-white rhetoric in public chat. Racist griefing can be simplistic or, given the factor of anonymity and the difficulty of ascertaining true motives, maddeningly complex. The avatar named Obama’s behavior was over-the-top enough to be understood as deliberate trolling, but it fed on all too familiar and uncomfortable circumstances and highlighted the general absence or invisibility of black avatars in many areas of Second Life.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how familiarity with the viewers residents use to connect

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91 With as much cunning as racism, the tactic pushes part of the offense onto (presumably white) targets who might claim to be unsettled by a group of black attackers. Meanwhile, the presumption of their targets’ whiteness reflects back on the griefers.
to Second Life facilitates the fluidity with which they can function inworld, as connections develop between the real world physical being and the avatar she controls. That theme applies here with respect to inworld technologies and the ability to respond to griefing in certain ways, as well. Whether through learning how to use scripted technologies or through performing a consciously gendered response, some interview participants reported that they developed particular senses of embodiment that repositioned them not as victims but as combatants against perpetrators.

Two separate participants recalled similar beginnings when it came to exposure to griefing. Ainsley had been inworld for a matter of seconds on her first day before she was orbited at a welcome area. After logging off and then logging back in at her starting location twice to the same results, someone else intervened, causing her griefer to hit a deforming prim and thereby sabotaging him with another of the more “classic” griefer implements. Ainsley and her protector (also a female avatar) ended up befriending one another, and the latter came to teach her quite a bit about the objects griefers would use and how to use them against them. Io was a few months old when she went to a weapons testing sandbox to test a tool for which she needed a build- and script-enabled location. Soon after her arrival, she fell victim to a blitzer, which threw her so far into the sky that her location coordinates went into negative numbers. Incensed at being targeted merely because she was new and vulnerable, she became determined to learn all about the weapons that had been used against her. Both women—Ainsley at the welcome area and Io at the sandbox—began using their gradually acquired knowledge against those in the area who made a habit or a joke of tormenting newbies. They both learned how to script
inworld objects and have found extended (and non-griefing-related uses) for their skills. Just as learning to develop that cyborg-like connection between human and machine to function inworld is part of developing a sense of noncorporeal embodiment in relation to the avatar, I would suggest that learning these advanced tools and tricks in order to more effectively react to those already using them for malicious purposes works in a similar way. Knowledge, rather than an avatar’s size or gender, is what provides a resident with safety and the ability to protect herself, whether it is the basic principle of knowing how to sit down during an incident and fill out an Abuse Report or whether it is the advanced familiarity with complex griefer tools and how to outwit the perpetrators. I suggest that part of noncorporeal embodiment is the knowledge residents hold and are able to use, insofar as that knowledge reflects on physical capacity inworld, as it very clearly does within the context of violence and safety.

A third interview participant, Greer, is in many ways a typical Second Life resident, as far as griefing is concerned. He has not experienced strangers perpetrating griefing acts against his avatar’s body and has never frequented high-risk areas like infohubs, welcome areas, or sandboxes, but he has been present at a good number of location griefings, where an interloper rezzed objects or particles, attempted to move avatars against their will, or just made of themselves a general nuisance. Greer is, however, female-to-male transgender in real life and is especially aware of when he falls into particular gender roles intentionally or unintentionally. He said that when a location he is in is grieved, he feels a masculine response kick in and feels inclined to perform the role of protector, taking charge of the situation and driving out the griefers. Although
both Ainsley and Io have more focused experience learning how to deal with griefers under such circumstances, neither one regards her adopted role as protectors as gendered either masculine or feminine. For Greer, though, being the one to respond effectively to an attack is a role he embodies in terms of gender.

Whether one understands oneself as a griefer, a victim, or a protector, identifying with whatever gender(s), real life race(s), or Second Life species, I have tried to address how the act of griefing can have an effect on a resident’s sense of noncorporeal embodiment. As griefing is the nearest virtual equivalent to the phenomenon of real world violence, I have also been interested in exploring how roles of these kinds are internalized and embodied in contexts where the body is threatened but, being noncorporeal, cannot be permanently harmed and is not the primary determining factor toward resistance and safety.
Chapter 5: Conclusions, Discussion, and Looking Forward

In this concluding chapter, I discuss how I originally conceptualized the theoretical frameworks that I hoped the dissertation would contribute to, those that ended up being the most important, and directions for future research. The research conducted for this dissertation was largely exploratory rather than conclusive, and so the openings for new directions are many.

Initial Conceptualizations

As I began this research, my hope was that by focusing on embodiment, this project would become important to feminist scholars because, in the actual world, much theory on women and gender relies on notions of how the experience of being a woman is related to having a female body. The ways in which these notions are interpreted and indeed the meanings of all relevant concepts, right down to “female body,” vary considerably, but the way that having a gendered body shapes one’s social experience is at the root of much feminist work. The increasing centrality of the internet as a primary means of communication demands a fresh examination of these notions. Thomas (2007) identifies three ways in which using virtual space can provide a new view of embodiment:

1. First, from the connectedness between the corporeal body and the perceptions and experiences lived out on the screen and its associated cyberworlds; second, from the visual embodied image of the self as represented through the avatar on the
screen; and third, from the dimension of identity performance. (2007:14)

Thomas notes performativity and the particular relevance of the avatar as a visual representation (which are not the same concept) and, by referring to a “connectedness” between the corporeal and the perceptual, calls attention to the distinction between the two as well.

By examining the meaning of noncorporeal gendered embodiment in virtual space, I have sought to accomplish several goals. First, I have tried to establish gender analysis squarely within the cultural study of virtual worlds so that future researchers are more enabled to draw from feminist theory in exploring the meaning of personhood. Second, I have hoped to contribute to feminist scholarship on the experience of being physically and socially gendered by focusing on circumstances that challenge traditional understandings of mind/body dualism in ways that the concept of noncorporeal embodiment will help elucidate. Third, I have attempted to illustrate the importance of examining virtual worlds as sites of study for feminist researchers; as social interaction becomes increasingly mediated through many different forms of communications technology, feminist theorists must address changing forms of subjectivity that impact how women and men see themselves and each other as gendered beings.

Research on gender, embodiment, and identity in virtual environments has followed two predominant strands, fluctuating between, on the one hand, emphasizing the disembodied aspects of online interaction and the potential for constructing and experimenting with new identities (Stone 1995), and on the other, examining how users’ real life embodiment shapes their virtual participation (Bell 2001). Authors who identify
these two strands sometimes apply to them a chronology wherein earlier work presents an optimistic view of the internet as a realm of postmodern identity and community, minimally influenced by racism and sexism because bodies are not present to make difference visible, while later work argues in favor of reinstating the body as relevant to the study of virtual cultures (Elm 2009, van Doorn, Wyatt, and van Zoonen 2008). As Malin Sveningsson Elm (2009) points out, this shift in focus may relate to the evolution of internet technologies: in the 1990s, most online interaction was text-based and quite a bit of it anonymous, a context more compatible with identity flexibility than the social networking sites that came to dominate internet communications during the first decade of the twenty-first century (244). Not only are many people using social internet spaces to communicate mostly with people they already know, but the offline body figures into those communications more prominently, with photo sharing and the use of web cams becoming more routine (Elm 2009:244). In most studies of virtual identity, moreover, “embodiment” and “corporeality” are both frequently used to describe having an offline body that one uses to access virtual spaces, including anonymous virtual worlds (van Doorn, Wyatt, & van Zoonen 2008). Sometimes these terms are used to refer to the offline body even when the author addresses the construction of embodiment within a virtual context as well (DePalma and Atkinson 2007; Maher and Hoon 2008).

Many others dealing with graphical virtual worlds, however, often address

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92 People also increasingly use social networking resources with the identities they created in virtual worlds. For example, Plurk.com, a conversational bulletin board-style social networking site, includes Second Life in the drop-down menu of countries that members can identify as their location. Second Life users create their accounts in their avatars’ names and communicate with others they know through Second Life. While more prominent social networking giants like Facebook and Google+ have made a particular effort this past year to police the use of “pseudonyms,” Plurk has been open to the use of online-only identities in networking.
“embodiment” quite differently. A characteristic observation here is that the graphical, visual element contributes to “presence enacting itself as embodied identity” (Taylor 2002:44). Boellstorff found in his ethnography of Second Life residents that there is no easily identifiable split among the virtual body, the actual body, and the mind, that residents would comment on whether their avatars’ animation felt “natural” or “unnatural,” using actual-world embodiment as a reference point but virtual-world embodiment as the (pseudo-)sensory medium (2008:134). Meadows anecdotally tells of jumping in his computer chair when a Second Life avatar unexpectedly kicked his own across a room (2007). Having a controllable virtual, visual representation of oneself troubles the concept of embodiment as it is sometimes used by researchers of text-based internet communities and non-anonymous social networking communities. Because the construction of visual virtual spaces and bodies are strongly informed by actual space and bodies, though, virtual embodiment also complicates the postmodern speculations of early theorists who idealized virtual space as a realm of infinite identity possibilities.

Developing a concept of noncorporeal embodiment speaks to the discursive inconsistencies in how researchers of virtual worlds address embodiment and online identity, while also providing a new analytical angle for feminist scholarship that seeks to reinvest the biological body into understandings of gender in the actual world, such as in discussions of a topic called “new materialism.” As Myra J. Hird describes, “The term ‘materialism’ refers here to living and non-living matter, rather than the perhaps more familiar definition of materialism as the social and economic relations between women and men” (2004:231n). This approach criticizes social constructionism for interpreting
phenomena on a purely social level while ignoring the materiality of the people who are
the subject of interpretation. Hird suggests that feminist theory has shied away from
discussing material bodies because of strong associations between essentialism and the
biological. An exchange of views in the European Journal of Women’s Studies illustrates
that the topic may be in its early stages as a subject of debate. Sara Ahmed (2008)
proposes that advocates of the new materialism contribute to a discourse that routinely
positions feminist theory as biophobic and that this positioning is not justified. In a
response to Ahmed in the same journal, Noela Davis (2009) clarifies the arguments of
new materialists (or her interpretation of them) in more detail than Hird had previously
done. The new materialist position, evident in writings such as Elizabeth Wilson’s
Psychosomatic (2004), “is not that feminists do not address the biological in their work,
but that their engagement with it is restricted and conventional” (Davis 2009:70).

At root, the new materialist concern is with social constructionism constructing
the physical body out of the picture. But what if the physical body is already out of the
picture, or is only indirectly implicated? Virtual existence is not bodiless. In a metaphoric
sense, as I discussed mostly in Chapter 2, it is not even lacking in a biology. As I have
sought to illustrate, it hinges on the avatar body, the way the user constructs it, and the
ways that others interact with it. Although this research does not converse directly with
the specific points of new materialism, I hope for this research to serve more generally as
a counterpoint as well as contribution to work that aims to reinsert biology into feminist
studies of embodiment.

The use of the body in virtual worlds is by no means identical or even parallel to
the use of the corporeal body. It is more of a complement to or extension of the corporeal. But by examining similarities and differences, as well as the relationships between both bodies as mediated through technology, identity, and technological identity, I would like for this study of noncorporeal embodiment to contribute to feminist theories of the body by refining understandings of embodiment. In addition, virtuality is not limited to the interactions among avatars in an online graphical interface. Adopting Boellstorff’s conceptualization of the virtual, which posits that virtual existence has always been with us in “[d]reams, rituals, imagination, even language itself” (33), as well as in “the hallucination of heaven, the peyote vision, the dionysiac stupor…. the play, the novel, the opera, any system devised for losing ourselves in another world” (Schwartz 1996, quoted in Boellstorff 2008:33), suggests an even broader range of theoretical potential for research in this area. Second Life is especially well equipped as a research context for the study of virtual embodiment, but it is not the only context to which these concepts apply.

The cultural study of virtual worlds, especially from a feminist approach, provided another backdrop for my research and a sphere of scholarship to which I have hoped to contribute. Insofar as virtual worlds predate the highly detailed, three-dimensional graphic interface of platforms like Second Life, it is possible to trace such work to discussions of text-based worlds like LambdaMOO (Dibbell 1993). Women and gender have also received attention for as long as cyberspace has been seen as a space for the construction of culture and society (Cherny and Weise 1996). There is now an emerging body of work focusing specifically on Second Life as a cultural context, addressing topics such as construction of the self in virtual space (Jones 2006),
embodiment and community (Bardzell and Odom 2008), performativity and goodwill (Herman, Coombe, and Kaye 2006), and economics and entrepreneurship (Ondrejka 2004).

Amid the emerging research on Second Life, topics pertaining to women, gender, and sexuality have found their way into conference papers (Calvert 2008), chapters of larger works (Boellstorff 2008; Krotsoski 2008), and an active and extensive network of Second Life bloggers, some of whom I drew from significantly as sources for this research. Groups such as Gender Transgressors and the Avatar Identity Research Group exist within Second Life for people interested in exploring such topics inworld. In short, gender in Second Life is a hot topic for both formal and informal discussion and analysis. By focusing on gendered avatar embodiment and its relationship to a clutch of specific areas, I have drawn together a number of subtopics that have been addressed variously in dispersed contexts and provide a centralizing concept that I hope can help inform future work.

These are the ways in which I began research expecting the dissertation to fit into and contribute to bodies of existing research. On the one hand, research on embodiment in a virtual world could contribute to the decades-long discussions on the interrelations among each of the analytical concepts I am most concerned with—identity, sexuality, and violence—as they are regarded by different schools of feminist theory, while using a key element of virtual being—the state of noncorporeal embodiment—to revisit these ongoing discussions with an entirely new set of social circumstances. On the other hand, the project also used these conceptual tools to consolidate into a cohesive outline a range
of gender- and Second Life-related topics that currently take place within many different contexts. In a broader sense, as well, I entered the research expecting it to apply to a longer thread of the study of virtual worlds. To that end, I intended the project to contribute to an exploration of gender on the internet within a context that 1) provides an especially lucid sense of embodiment to its users, 2) is uniquely unstructured and famously encouraging of user innovation and creation, and 3) has an internal culture that shapes many other aspects of interpersonal interaction, and thus 4) has already introduced so many advances in what virtual worlds can and perhaps should do that it provides a basis of comparison for all other virtual worlds to come in the indefinite future.

I will address a few of the methodological stumbling blocks that I encountered during the process of researching and writing this dissertation and then move into a discussion of what I accomplished and how the topics I addressed can be built further. I expected interviews and blog postings (which would serve as a sort of all-access focus group) to be more central to the research design than they ended up being. My relative inexperience with such methods combined with a general lack of response from participants caused me to look toward a variety of written sources that addressed the central subjects in their own ways. Text is the primary mode of communication in computer-based environments (though there are those in Second Life who rely almost exclusively on voice when they can), so it is no surprise that written examples of a variety of sources existed for review. These included blogs already maintained by Second Life residents, bug reports filed on the Linden Lab JIRA, posts to the Second Life forums (which often covered the very questions I would have liked to ask participants), literature
circulated inworld by groups under study, and ads placed in the Second Life search. These sources, particularly the forums, provided what was perhaps an even more varied pool of data than primarily relying on interviews and my own blog would have been because they reach a wider range of Second Life residents than I found myself able to reach on my own. Even though these sources turned out to be very helpful for refining my theories and arguments, these methods are limited. Future research projects concerned with this and related topics can use other kinds of methods, such as survey data collection and more focused interviews to further the area of study.

Discussion of Research

As I explained in Chapter 1, this dissertation took a “cafeteria” approach to theory and research methods. I did not attempt to root it in any particular theoretical framework but pulled from whatever areas seemed to be the most fruitful for the immediate needs. This approach turned out to complement one of the aspects of Second Life as a virtual world that I believe to be the most compelling: its mixture of persistence and change. On the one hand, virtual worlds of the kind that this research applies to are, by definition, persistent (Bell 2008:3). The data that constitute them continue to be stored on its servers, even when not in active use. At any given time, in fact, the majority of the Second Life grid is vacant of avatars, but with its physical content no less persistent in its existence than an empty home in the actual world,93 ready for its graphics to be viewed and its scripts used by the next person to happen through. If a virtual tree falls in a virtual forest,

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93 One can view what parts of the grid are occupied or vacant by opening the world map. It displays dot icons representing avatars if there are any present. In my experience, what one would most commonly find on the map is a majority of vacant regions, with some pockets of heavy activity (almost always events of some kind) and a number of dots scattered alone or in small numbers.
does it make a sound? According to the sim’s script times, it sure does. This persistence means that, barring technical hiccups and deliberately altered user-side settings, different users will be experiencing the world in potentially the same way. They undergo a “shared experience” of inworld content.

On the other hand, despite their potential for persistence—they are obviously resistant to the kinds of seasonal change and geologic evolution that affect the real world environment and could, in theory, remain the same as long as their servers are maintained—virtual worlds and their content are in practice subject to extremely rapid change and fluctuation. As a Second Life resident, I have found it necessary to adopt a Zen approach to locations and content and to resist growing attached to any particular place or construct, as they can and most likely will change along with technological upgrades, Linden Lab pricing policies, and their owners’ whims and commitments to both real and Second Life.

It is possible to bring up statistical data to gauge a region or simulator’s performance; “script time” is one of the many measures. Some of the statistical measures would be comprehensible to intermediate users, but others are fairly advanced. This is not something that new users are likely to do on day one of their virtual lives. Because different regions are run on the same real life servers, it is possible to measure some statistics remotely without being present on the region in avatar form.

The phrase “shared experience” was introduced into the Second Life lexicon by Linden Lab recently in a February 2012 policy change aimed at restricting the kinds of development permitted to third party viewers. According to newly written section 2.k of the Third Party Viewer Policy, development “must not provide any feature that alters the shared experience of the virtual world in any way not provided by or accessible to users of the latest release of the Linden Lab viewer.” In http://secondlife.com/corporate/tpv.php, updated 24 February 2012. Accessed 12 May 2012.

Following my early griefing experience, the one I described in Chapter 4, I teleported to an area called Apollo Gardens, which one of my first Second Life friends had recommended to me as a place she sometimes visited to do Tai Chi. The idea of watching one’s avatar practice virtual Tai Chi was bizarre to me at the time, but relaxation of whatever kind seemed like a good idea after the jolting experience I had just been through. The region turned out to be a lush, forested area of canyons and mountains, with a mixture of ancient Greek and fantasy-inspired architecture in the meditation pavilions and cuddle benches planted across the terrain. Towers stretched up to the clouds, while bridges and airborne wading fountains overlooked the landscape. I hopped on a Tai Chi poseball with several others already in action and found the environment to be a truly calming one. Apollo Gardens became the first location in Second Life to
Like the virtual world itself, a theoretical approach to studying the people within it needs to employ a flexible framework, allowing different aspects to be examined from different angles. Finding patterns amid the flux is the challenge, and so, while I have drawn from and hope to contribute to different bodies of theory with respect to the specific areas of identity, sexuality, and violence, I have found support for the underlying notion of noncorporeal embodiment in all three, at least in the sense that it can be used as an analytical lens for understanding users’ experience of each. I believe that the research covered in the preceding chapters supports a view of noncorporeal embodiment as a type of cyborg embodiment similar to what Donna Haraway conceptualized in the 1980s but firmly rooted in the real life positionality of the user and therefore not as post-gender as she might have envisioned. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the avatar body is not just an image on a computer screen; it is controlled via hardware, software, and metaware as a representational prosthesis of its user. “Cyborgs,” says Rosi Braidotti, “or techno-bodies, are the subject of our prosthetic culture in a complex web of dynamics and technologically mediated social relations” (2006:37). Noncorporeal embodiment illustrates the “mutual interdependence of bodies and technologies” that “creates a new symbiotic relationship between them” (37).

The relationships among the user, the avatar, and the many levels of technology used by both exhibit this cyborgism. I spoke in Chapter 2 about how familiarity with one’s viewer software can facilitate one’s ability to interact comfortably inworld, but

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97 Metaware is a term of my own, to be explained in the next paragraph below. It is not a term of analysis but of convenience, in order to identify and refer to a certain category of virtual matter.
other layers of technology show up elsewhere, including in the avatar’s mediated—rather than the user’s direct—use of technology. I wish to introduce the term “metaware” here to describe the kinds of technology that are used only indirectly by the real life person at the keyboard but must be manipulated through the virtually embodied self. When an avatar engages visually in sexual activities with another avatar, it may be by using poseball animations or anatomical prosthetics. Given that the avatar itself serves as a prosthetic extension of the user into the virtual world, the application of an inworld prosthesis (an interactive penis or clitoris, for example) constitutes a sort of adding on of technologies on top of technologies in a way intended to return the experience back to the user’s body in the form of sensory pleasure.

The use of metaware in the form of complex scripted toys/weapons, especially those designed to disrupt the grid or region’s functioning, by griefers and those who combat them also illustrates a multi-level cyborgian embodiment, but in this case one in which at least some participants are more interested in interfering with a sense of immersion they believe others enjoy. Whether one is the griefer, enjoying the result of the harassing act, or whether one is a target, forced to respond to the incident by extracting oneself from a previously constructed immersive context, the avatar’s user may experience the use of these technologies on the physical and actual level. Griefing conducted with the intention of breaking residents’ perception of virtual reality as an acceptable reality makes use of the virtual world’s tools turned back on themselves. I would suggest, based on the work presented in this dissertation, that virtual being in a graphical environment is a form of cyborg embodiment of particular complexity.
Beyond this contention, though, it becomes more difficult to generalize across Second Life residents as to how they experience or express virtual embodiment. Ann J. Cahill’s discussion of feminist approaches to the topic of embodiment in the introductory chapter of *Rethinking Rape* (2001) resonates with the way gender seems to be enacted in Second Life in the sense that for every feminist position on embodiment, there are those in the virtual world who seem to exemplify it and others who act in resistance to it. “The sex/gender distinction prevalent in 1970s liberal feminism,” for instance, “allowed feminists to declare much of what constituted femininity ‘unnatural,’ that is, cultural, and not biologically determined” (Cahill 2001:5), and since one’s biological sex does not determine one’s Second Life avatar’s sex or gender, it would seem to provide an excellent opportunity to explore gender as it is fully cultural, untarnished by biology. However, pressures abound to “be honest about” one’s real life sex in certain circumstances, though those circumstances shift from one person’s stated preference to another. Even in a context where gender could be interpreted as entirely cultural, it remains anchored to varying extents to the biological; or to put it a different way, the

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98 At one extreme, I had a conversation once with someone who felt that a person using an avatar not of his or her own gender should include that information publicly in his or her profile. This extreme point of view is not common, going by some public discussions of related topics. One recent forum discussion that illustrates a variety of perspectives on this topic was active from November 2011 through April 2012 under the title, “Does RL gender matter when dating someone?”: [http://community.secondlife.com/t5/Lifestyles-and-Relationships/Does-RL-gender-matter-when-dating-someone/td-p/1243351](http://community.secondlife.com/t5/Lifestyles-and-Relationships/Does-RL-gender-matter-when-dating-someone/td-p/1243351) (Accessed 12 May 2012). An older one, active from September through December 2005, prior to voice functionality being introduced inworld, proposes a method of gender verification: [http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/59/76158/1.html](http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/108/59/76158/1.html) (Accessed 12 May 2012). Perhaps most intriguingly, a resident formally submitted a feature request for a Linden Lab-instituted gender verification process in April 2009: [https://jira.secondlife.com/browse/SVC-4180](https://jira.secondlife.com/browse/SVC-4180) (Accessed 12 May 2012). Taking the discussion in each of these threads as examples, it seems the most common outlook (in 2012 as well as in 2005) is that the more intimate one is with someone, the more important it is to be frank about one’s real life gender identity, but where the specific point of intimacy falls is relative. Meanwhile, there is significant resistance to any proposal to implement institutionalized gender verification; the majority opinion appears to be that such verifying should be done within individual circumstances. In short, almost no one objects to the use of cross-gender avatars in and of itself, but most people are more comfortable (or least anxious) if they know.
cultural seems intent on reifying the biological.

Similarly, Second Life provides opportunities for people like Caelan, who comfortably shifts genders between and within avatars, taking note of how others respond to hir shifts rather than worrying about whether sie is performing that gender “correctly,” and like Greer, who originally gave his female alt a tomboyish appearance but who gradually found her becoming more feminine, in part, because he found that “lesbians in Second Life are attracted to more feminine avatars.” Despite the opportunities for gender fluidity or avatar drag, the majority of interviewees and blog respondents, as well as contributors to the various other blogs and websites I consulted as sources, report feeling more comfortable when using avatars of their own sex/gender and even express concern that they would not be able to perform the/an other gender adequately.

That the real life body figures into the noncorporeal one for many people is not necessarily detrimental to an exploration of how gender is experienced and expressed in virtual worlds. Cahill notes, with respect to a feminist return to examining the body, that an “emphasis on the bodily, material facets of women’s experiences is in direct contrast to a philosophical tradition where a person/subject/agent (purportedly unsexed, notoriously masculine in its pertinent characteristics) is marked not by physical attributes but by intellectual ones” (2001:6). I take this as a caution that research on virtual worlds (and the internet in general) can lapse into gender-unaware analysis when it strays too far from acknowledging the corporeal. Fortunately, avatar representations continually reference the corporeal even when they themselves, and the experience of having an avatar, are noncorporeal. Nonetheless, a cliché persists in virtual contexts, albeit more
prevalent in gaming than in nongaming environments, that most users are male in real life, even when they use female avatars. Usually it comes up in humorous contexts, as in an episode of machinima (animation filmed in a virtual world) program DiVAS featuring Second Life television host Phaylen Fairchild. In the episode, Phaylen tries to join a World of Warcraft guild run by a large green being who insists on calling her “sir” because “Real chicks don’t play games… and until I confirm your gender by webcam and see verified boobage, you’re ‘he,’ ‘him,’ ‘bro,’ and ‘dude.’”

This joke about the assumption of a male default that can only be challenged by female self-objectification earns its humor because of a set of interconnected stereotypes. I have seen it arising in Second Life as well, however, with an acquaintance who admits to referring to all people as “he” until he hears their voices, without an obvious voice filter. I would have thought he was joking, too, when he said this, except that I have witnessed him referring to people with clearly female avatars by masculine pronouns on multiple occasions. This is not an individual who has displayed especially conservative or retrogressive attitudes in other respects, making it a particularly disturbing and disappointing habit on his part. It is perhaps telling that this man, and the female avatars I have heard him refer to with male pronouns, know each other through work in a highly technical field.

I consider it related to the fact that the point in my own present research where Cahill’s observation is most relevant is with respect to grieving. One of my arguments has been that because resistance to grieving requires knowledge, rather than physical strength,

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it makes little sense to expect female avatars (or users) to be less equipped than male avatars (or users) to handle a griefing attack. Griefing was described by most interviewees and other sources (articles, websites, etc.) as an overwhelmingly male activity (Ainsley, for instance, reported that among griefers, even female avatars were more likely to turn out to be real life men than women). The pairing of knowledge-as-strength in the griefing context with the above acquaintance’s assumption that his colleagues in a technical field are male unless proven otherwise supports Cahill’s point in a slightly reversed manner.

In other words, the assumption of maleness in male-dominated contexts, even with respect to female avatars, privileges cultural stereotypes over chosen representations. It denies the significance of avatar gender, only to reinforce an unknown real life sex. Although this assumption is restricted to the realm of the comical for most, its persistence calls for attention to be paid to avatars as bodies. It troubles and conflicts with the phenomenon that took place at The Springs, covered in Chapter 2, in which the founders defined maleness as a set of attributes that they never, thereafter, appeared to apply to female avatars, essentially constructing maleness (in the absence of a male avatar) into invisibility. Cahill’s observation that the feminist turn to the body comprises a challenge to the conflation of disembodied masculinity to intellect points to the ways in which graphical virtual worlds may prove advantageous over textual contexts for some kinds of feminist internet research. The injection of bodies into virtual space highlights how assumptions of the masculine subject are evident as deliberate constructions (that is, one could argue that applying masculine subjectivity to a female avatar takes effort and
While noncorporeal embodiment allows for the visibility of female and multiply gendered bodies and their implied and, stereotypes notwithstanding, complex subjectivities, graphical virtual spaces also create opportunities for the reinsertion of certain notable forms of masculine embodiment and male disembodiment. Specifically, I refer to the fetishization of the penis that emerged at different times in this research. First, as I addressed in Chapter 3, there is the new male resident’s need for a “freenis.” Linden-provided starter avatars are permanently clothed and therefore devoid of visible primary and secondary sex characteristics; though the acquisition of a non-default skin can provide nipples and, for female avatars, the suggestion of a vulva, the male shape will continue to lack its masculine appendages. Providing an “incomplete” male avatar may seem, for some new male users, like an emasculating way to begin in a new world. Although the quest for a freenis and the humor that older residents invest in it is different in important ways from the persistence of penis imagery in griefing covered in Chapter 4, the two phenomena may yet be related. Research conducted through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theory in particular would probably be able to draw some interesting conclusions.

In addition to the obvious—fixation on the physical representation of a body part that is almost never publicly visible in real life—there is another side to the penis phenomenon that ties it into a larger theme of this work. Specifically, it is how embodied identity and socialization into the cultures of Second Life relate to one another. I have referred at various points to distinctions between “new” residents and “older” or “more
experienced” residents without attempting to define how new is “new” or how old is “older.” I suggest at this point that marking out a timeline would not be useful for determining such categories, as the development of identity and connections to communities and familiarity with Second Life overall can all occur at vastly different paces for different residents. The important thing to note is merely that such processes (I suggest) do take place, and the patterns that emerge in the topics covered in this dissertation support this suggestion.

For example, this process is visible in: the discomfort of older residents with learning a new viewer interface after having spent years growing accustomed to the old one; the process of customizing the avatar and the heightened sense of identification with it this customization can offer; the shift from using primarily animations for representing inworld sexual activity to using primarily voice or text communication; some users’ early days of sexual adventurousness giving way to more conventional sex, dating, or relationship models; expressions of regret by older residents concerning fashion choices they made as newbies (indicating that familiarity even with a sense of inworld aesthetics comes with time); the greater vulnerability of new residents to certain forms of griefing, especially those that target the avatar body rather than a location; the related (but not identical) distress experienced by new residents when griefing occurs due to a lesser ability to respond effectively to the incident; and of course the state of not having full control over one’s own noncorporeal embodiment when it is new, which connects all of the above observations together. Not all of these apply to everyone (some people never engage in sexual activity inworld, much less change their preferred techniques over time;
some always remain oblivious to anti-grieving strategies, etc.), but when these processes do occur, the pattern tends to take place in a particular direction. Each of these arose in the previous chapters, and each one points to a pattern in which growing comfortable with one’s virtual embodiment, becoming familiar with social norms and communities inworld, and developing knowledge of inworld technologies (both software and metaware) all take place on parallel timelines.

Because this research was predominantly exploratory, directed toward examining the validity of a concept—noncoporeal embodiment—by applying it to a range of Second Life experiences, it leaves quite a bit more room for additional research in Second Life and other virtual worlds of its kind (graphical and open-ended, with customizable avatars). In the final section of this chapter I will discuss some of the limits of this dissertation and where the topics it raises can go from here.

Directions for Future Research

I would like to impress before anything else the importance of the researcher’s positioning with respect to virtual worlds. The summary of transitions I relate above, the processes that apply to Second Life residents as they have been inworld for a period of time, should provide an idea of how important it is to recognize the aspects of the virtual world that make it a culture that would likely be difficult to understand if one does not participate in it directly. Would a “newbie,” for instance, be able to recognize these processes in her participants if she had not gone through at least some of them herself? Boellstorff discusses the implications of conducting “virtual anthropology” and the value of participant observation in particular as he dwelt in Second Life over the course of his
research as both an insider and an ethnographer (2008:65-71). Living within the culture under study for a long period of time is a common part of anthropological methodologies in particular and is a familiar practice within some other disciplines as well. I would recommend, however, some degree of immersive involvement within virtual worlds for researchers even in fields that are not as closely connected to their subject populations. Significant themes in this dissertation emerged not from deliberate study but from simply existing as a social (but attentive and analytical) being within Second Life, and I would suggest that the very topic of this research—that of embodiment—is central to the reason.

One can probably go a long way toward familiarizing oneself with many of the discussions and topics pertaining to Second Life without ever creating an avatar and entering the world, but Second Life users, to a great extent, recognize “insider” and “outsider” status to the degree that even Lindens are suspect. Even though employees of Linden Lab spend their workdays contributing to the functioning of Second Life, many of the decisions made pertaining to the use of the world and various services come into question by residents specifically because Lindens are not visible as embodied participants inworld. Contributors to blogs, forums, and the bug tracker detect a great disconnect between Lindens and the world they work for, and this is sometimes voiced in terms of Lindens’ presence inworld and the suspicion that they do not spend sufficient time there.\textsuperscript{100} The notion that embodied presence is critical to understanding the needs of

\textsuperscript{100} Some indirect indications of this view appear in the comments section in a Tateru Nino blog post (Nino 2012). The JIRA issue tracker is a useful place to look for topics that stir many residents to voice opinions, and one of the biggest has been a request for Linden Lab to return to first name/surname account names (they changed, against enormous resident opposition, to single-name accounts in November 2010). The ticket, \url{https://jira.secondlife.com/browse/SVC-7125}, includes comments such as, “No one that spends any
the userbase is apparent in many complaints about the Lab’s practices.

Turning back to research, certainly not all research has the same goals, and so there might be topics that can be addressed through external and not lived analysis. As in any social science or humanities research, the point is for the researcher to be self-reflexive and to strive to recognize her position as an insider, an outsider, or someone who straddles the two and how that position affects understandings and interpretations of the information collected, as well as the beliefs that shape the kinds of information she seeks. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to tell what one’s positioning actually is; as I look back on even my own outlook and how it changed over the course of this research, it has been like hiking through a densely grown brush. At any given point, it is possible to look back over the trampled brush behind, but it is not possible to see whether one is near the end of the brush or barely beyond the beginning. Given that the trajectory is probably not even linear, even when one has a good idea of one’s own positioning, it does not imply an ability to generalize it to others.

An aspect of Second Life that probably contributes to this difficulty of gauging one’s position is that it is both immediate and remote as a space of study. It is right there in the computer, available to most internet users (older and poorly compatible computers and connections notwithstanding), with only a registration page and the client’s download time as barriers to entry. It should be a space readily accessible and easy to research, comprising people all over the world who do not necessarily differ significantly from those one encounters offline. Anyone can have an avatar, and so Second Life has become
a place for both seeing what it is like first-hand and seeing how avatar embodiment affects study participants. I would argue, though, that both the researcher and the research participants’ positions and backgrounds in the context matter greatly to how such research is understood.

For example, Stuart Boon and Christine Sinclair address Second Life and Facebook as potential educational applications. One of the authors admits, as a new user compelled by class requirements to try both platforms, a “reluctance to engage… combined with a curiosity” (101), while the other author’s position is not described at all. I have no objection to the authors making and presenting observations from the perspective of new users, but they draw some of their conclusions about Second Life without reflexive consideration for how this positioning might have influenced their interpretations. For example, the authors characterize the “creation of an avatar” as “effect[ing] a symbolic disembodiment” (2009:106), right before they explain how many options for avatar embodiment exist. Because they do not explain how they understand symbolic disembodiment here, the phrase strikes an odd chord against the other impressions of virtual embodiment relayed in this dissertation.

The authors present other conclusions that I suspect would be debatable if presented to longtime Second Life residents, such as the belief that “[d]igital spaces cannot yet contain the messy complexities of the real and most would not wish them to” (107), with no indication of which complexities they mean, a critical detail when such a statement may hold true for most with respect to job stressors but betrays a limited perspective where emotional entanglements are concerned. The authors fret that “there
virtually is no way to ascertain the authenticity of another user through their avatar” (107) and regard this as a limitation not just for their own taste but in general, without exploring to what extent real life information—in comparison to the sharing of feelings, conversations about ideas, the divulging of private yet anonymous information—figures into definitions and senses of “trust” between people who know each other in a virtual context. If these interpretations were presented as the impressions of Second Life participants early in their tenure who were aware that their perspectives may be limited, then I would not take issue with them, but they seem to mean them to characterize Second Life on the whole.

At the same time, I cannot claim to know how generalizable my own experiences have been. I can assert that virtual space may house greater variability in “messy” emotional “complexity” than Boon and Sinclair realize and that, similarly, “authenticity” of the kind that they highly value could be of great importance to some Second Life residents but very little to others, with no loss of trust or a sense of closeness. These point to the kinds of areas for further study that it may take some degree of inside (i.e., embodied) awareness to recognize—in this case, not the answers to the questions but the questions for study themselves. Even with respect to methodologies, then, an awareness of how noncorporeal embodiment may be related to the researcher’s positionality can contribute to research in virtual worlds.

As for how this concept of noncorporeal embodiment can contribute to future work in feminist theory, I would like to return to some of the topics raised in the earlier chapters about which I would have liked to have more conclusive findings than I had.
These are areas that could point to directions for future research. I hope for the concept of noncorporeal embodiment to contribute to feminist theory discussions on embodiment by offering a construct against which theories of the embodied experience of real life can be compared. That is to say, I believe there may be things to learn about how individuals develop a sense of physical selfhood through representations rather than corporeal bodies, and I hope that this research has opened up areas to explore these possibilities. Such examinations could reveal how and whether physical bodies, or the sociocultural meanings that make them what they are, circumscribe such things as identity, sexuality, and violence. By exploring how people who have such bodies create second (or third, or multiple) bodies that function according to different rules, feminist theorists can revisit which of the real world’s expectations or embodied inscriptions carry over and which ones are abandoned.

I would like to recall some older feminist writings for this purpose as well as more recent ones because I harbor a bit of curiosity about how theories developed a generation ago would hold up with respect to a social context that the authors could not have anticipated. One text that I believe may be fruitful to revisit as a “classic” text of second wave feminism is Catharine MacKinnon’s “Sexuality.” This essay, originally published in 1989, argues for a feminist theory of sexuality that recognizes sexuality—women’s as well as men’s—as inherently political, and because politics and sexuality cannot be clearly distinguished from one another, “to seek an equal sexuality without political transformation is to seek equality under conditions of inequality” (1997:172). I do not disagree with this part of her position, but the details of the argument
get fuzzier, as she correlates sex with an expression of men’s power, or a subjection of oneself to it, even outside of heterosexual intercourse or when a “female sadist” is asserting the power (169). Because sexuality itself has been defined in ways that uphold hegemonic structures of power and inequality, the essay renders invisible any sexual acts that might possibly provide examples of alternatives. The overall picture is pessimistic; it is unclear whether women have the ability to assert a sexuality they can lay claim to.

The virtual world and conditions of noncorporeal embodiment would not necessarily be free of the political constraints that MacKinnon identifies, since they are built by people who spend most of the time in the real world. Second Life, however, offers residents the opportunity to enact identities, including sexual identities, in ways that their real lives may prohibit. In addition, the rewards of sexual conquest in the virtual realm are not necessarily equivalent to those MacKinnon discusses. Rape, for instance, has no precise equivalent because what most closely resembles rape would usually be consensual, while anything nonconsensual (my first griefing experience, for instance) is easily escaped and will in most cases have less significant lasting effects (than real life nonconsensual incidents). Indeed, there are quite a few pieces of evidence that support some of MacKinnon’s arguments, beginning with the fact that entire regions are devoted to roleplaying “rape,” to say nothing of the Gorean civilizations centered on women’s sexual slavery. Because MacKinnon views the voluntary enactment of sexual inequality as evidence for sexuality having been “constructed under conditions of male supremacy” (169) rather than as freely chosen, the proliferation of communities and locations that permit or encourage overtly unequal sexual relations in Second Life would seem to
support her position. Because culture trumps biology for MacKinnon, and the sexes of
the participants are not as important as the exploitative acts they engage in, even the
potential for sexual fluidity behind the avatars (people of any gender using avatars of
their own or any other gender in any prescribed role) would not necessarily counter the
arguments she presents.

Applying the MacKinnon piece to cybersexuality simultaneously raises some
challenging questions, however. Despite the visibility of sexualities that resemble or
seem to perpetuate forms of male sexual domination, the expression of embodied female
desire would be a potentially fruitful area for further examination. To what extent is
women’s sexuality circumscribed by sexual politics inworld when women such as
interview participant Eko and several blog contributors join Second Life with the express
intention of exploring possibilities for sexual fulfillment? How much of a concern do
sexually active women in Second Life have for being regarded as “slutty” or
promiscuous? How important is the role of safety to women’s ability to express
themselves sexually, and how does this become visible in a context that promises the
possibility of sexual pleasure without risk of disease or pregnancy? While many female
avatars in Second Life are subjected to sexual propositions on a regular basis (as noted in
Chapter 4), do women experience this as a form of social pressure to be sexually active?

Some of these questions could be explored in research on one area that I barely
covered in this dissertation but that takes up a good portion of the grid: roleplaying
communities in Second Life. Many MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online
roleplaying games) exist structured around specific storylines established by their
creators. In some respects, Second Life’s roleplaying communities more closely resemble these structured MMORPGs than they do the more free-form non-roleplaying communities within Second Life, but for one important factor: the topics and characters that are roleplayed in Second Life are chosen by the participants. Many are adapted from pop culture, and where those are concerned there may be legal restrictions involved with the use of trademarked and copyrighted names, but these are seldom enforced, and large communities enjoy playing characters from *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter* universes, among many others. Roleplay associated with the Gor novels of John Norman is easily the most visible of all of these, and this certainly bears exploration. Why would such a misogynistic platform provide the foundation for perhaps the largest collective fantasy in Second Life? To be sure, it has been adapted by subcommunities into all-male, all-female, and femdom variants, but are there really no other sources for erotic roleplay mythologies that could inspire such activity?

One blog contributor, Braidy, suggested an alternative, observing, “I am also intrigued that no one has yet (to my knowledge) recreated the world of ‘The Sleeping Beauty Chronicles’ in SL. Those books, at least, are far from misogynistic.” The books Braidy refers to are a trilogy written by Anne Rice, under the pseudonym A.N. Roquelaure (1983-85). The books depict a kingdom of sexual slavery in which members of the upper nobility are long-term tenured slaves to other nobles. As in Gor, sexual

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101 In 2009, Frank Herbert’s estate filed legal complaints against *Dune* roleplayers in Second Life. Though they would have been permitted to roleplay the concepts without making use of the names from the books, the legal action was enough to end the enjoyment of roleplaying entirely (Au 2009).

102 Femdom, or female dominant, Gorean roleplay reverses the usual gender structure. This, as well as gay male and lesbian Gorean communities, are often viewed negatively by traditional Goreans because they are not true to the original texts. Information of variants of Gorean roleplay comes from personal communication with Goreans.
slavery in *The Sleeping Beauty Trilogy* is institutionalized within an all-encompassing, self-contained civilization. Unlike in Gor, slaves and their owners are not bifurcated by gender; women and men serve in both roles, and although the slaves’ condition and treatment is in most cases not consensual, it is temporary, intended as a rite of passage that will make the same nobles into more empathetic rulers at the end of their servitude. Some of the elements that would seem to make Gor a readily adaptable universe are visible in the Beauty books, including a social structure with clear roles for roleplayers and a titillating slavery theme that makes Second Life an ideal venue. I was able to locate a two-region estate devoted to Beauty roleplay, but nothing on the scale of Gor. Although Catharine MacKinnon would no doubt consider the hierarchic Beauty mythology to be complicit in perpetuating patriarchal sexual politics despite Rice’s attention to gender balance, the trilogy has attracted more complex feminist theorizing, such as by Amalia Ziv, who suggests it may be read as (but not reduced to) “a politically correct SM fantasy” with a “flexible and pluralistic vision of sexuality” (1994:69). Why, then, does the unambiguously misogynistic mythology grow to constitute a major Second Life community while the more sexually progressive one is relegated to minor niche status? An exploration of Second Life’s roleplaying communities, both sexual and nonsexual, could elucidate how the virtual world allows users to realize collective fantasies, what fantasies are chosen, and which are most popular and fully fleshed-out.

Researching the topic of violence in Second Life generated some questions that I believe could be well worth further examination. Because the lasting damage resulting from inworld violence is psychological rather than physical, the idea that it is embodied
at all may not be immediately evident, though examples abound to the contrary, including those such as Dibbell’s “A Rape in Cyberspace,” which took place in a text-based virtual environment. My own early griefing experience was shocking and terrifying at the time and did, I would say, make me feel violated in a way that exists on the same spectrum as corporeally embodied sexual assault, somewhere in the vicinity of real life sexual harassment. As I hope to have made clear in Chapter 4, though, my response to the incident was closely intertwined with the fragility of my sense of embodiment in my early days as an avatar. If the same thing were to happen today, it is difficult to guess how I would respond, but I expect that while I would regain my composure more quickly and feel far more equipped to react effectively, the initial shock and sense of violation would be the same. Of course, my incident alone has limited importance; it would be valuable for future research to explore how virtual world residents experience violence but to do so through the lens of embodiment, recognizing that any single person’s sense of noncorporeal embodiment is likely to change over time. I would suggest that it is, in fact, this transition over time in how Second Life residents appear to gain a less fragile and more secure sense of inworld embodiment that emphasizes how such experiences and the responses they engender are embodied.

This recommendation echoes Cahill’s recommendation to view rape as an embodied experience, saying, “the development not only of a subject’s body, but also of a subject’s experience and conceptualization of his or her body, takes place in a particular, situated context and thus is linked in important ways to the various specific discourses that constitute that context” (2001:113). That it is possible to explore the
experience of violence—sexual as well as non-sexual—with attention paid to targets’
sense of embodiment even when the body is not corporeal could contribute to research in
this area for those who have carried on or who draw from Cahill’s approach to rape as an
embodied experience. Feminist research on pornography and its influence on women and
men’s embodied experience of sexuality could be a valuable direction for additional
virtual worlds research, as well. Cybersex takes forms that may resemble interactively
produced erotica: textual dialogs and animated sequences in the absence of direct skin-to-
skin contact between partners. What social and gender dynamics underlie the production
of such scenarios, though? An exploration of power and its role in shaping cybersex
encounters could have implications for sexuality in general as well as for pornography, as
authored and mediated material.

The examination of rape and other violence as embodied by survivors is not the
only area of Second Life violence that can inform further study both within and outside
of virtual worlds. Some of the recurrent themes of grieving acts themselves are almost
amusingly reminiscent of early feminists’ interpretations of rape and its causes. Almost
forty years ago, Susan Brownmiller wrote, “Man’s discovery that his genitalia could
serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of
prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe” (1975:14-15).
Although I suspect that flying disembodied phalluses and the literal manifestation of
men’s genitals-as-weapon, the penis gun,\textsuperscript{103} are in and of themselves more likely to
inspire irritation and eye-rolling in Second Life than outright fear, other aspects of their

\textsuperscript{103} One example of this kind of object can be viewed here:
https://d44ytnim3cfy5.cloudfront.net/assets/4671949/view_large/Snapshot_011.jpg
prevalence could be fruitful for closer examination. For example, I briefly mentioned earlier that it points to some clear directions for psychoanalytic feminist theory. In addition (and in conjunction), how does the consistent pairing of grieving with penis imagery gender the atmosphere surrounding victimization? How does it reflect or contribute to theories of rape that focus on intent of the perpetrator? With respect to location-based grieving, the use of penis weapons would seem geared toward turning attention toward the griefer, rather than inflicting direct harm on those present. It would be useful to consider whether any of these observations about grieving in virtual worlds, such as the construction of a self-consciously masculine context or how a sexualized act is about asserting masculinity rather than about who the actual victim is, could apply to the study of violence in real life.

To the extent that, in Judith Butler’s view, “there is no better theory [than psychoanalysis] for grasping the workings of fantasy construed not as a set of projections on an internal screen but as part of human relationality itself” (2004:14-15), feminist psychoanalytic theory can provide a potentially fruitful inroad not only for examining the literal projection of phallic symbolism into virtual physical space but also for exploring virtual worlds as a collective fantasy (or multitude of fantasies) built on relationality itself. If, as well, “fantasy is essential to an experience of one’s own body, or that of another, as gendered” (15), then there should be room for looking further at gender dynamics among noncorporeal bodies as, perhaps, creations of fantasy and mediums for reiterating genderings. Virtual worlds like Second Life are, after all, constructed by their users, who simultaneously interact in social pockets and in an overall virtual culture,
taking part in building social contexts as well as physical structures. Although I did not use the concept of fantasy as an analytical lens in this research, such an approach could offer new angles for exploring the collective process of developing norms and normativity, including and especially with regard to gender.

My engagement with Butler in this research was, in keeping with the “cafeteria approach” to theory I utilized, selective, mostly following Angela Thomas’s use of performativity theory in her work with teens in virtual worlds. In Chapter 1, I discussed Butler’s approach to sex, gender, biological determinism, and free will, and suggested that virtual worlds research and noncorporeal embodiment could be used to reflect on their “blurriness”; in Chapter 2, I applied the concept of performativity to avatar embodiment to highlight the fabrication of reality and the repetitive aspect of doing gender in virtual space. There is, however, great potential for more substantial conversation between Butler’s theories and virtual worlds research. For example, I delineated between “virtual” and “actual” worlds in this dissertation, as is standard for most of the existing research on Second Life I drew from (though not always in those precise terms). That such a delineation is standard does not mean that it is inevitable, though, and perhaps future discussions can examine ways in which the “actual” functions as the virtual, paralleling a questioning of anatomical sex, for instance, as deterministic rather than as part of a reiteration of gender. The word “actual” itself—though used by Boellstorff specifically as an alternative to “real”—nonetheless implies something essentially real, and thus the basis of its reality is subject to interrogation. Like Boellstorff’s, my use of the actual/virtual binarism is intended to represent “an
experientially salient aspect of online culture” that “persists in spite of attempts to deconstruct it” (2008:19). That is, it represents how I believe most people in Second Life understand what it means to “be in” Second Life and was for that reason a suitable construct for this dissertation. It is, however, a construct, and one that I have taken part in reinforcing as normative for its context. It would be valid for future analysis to consider this construct and if and how it is normative as an “experientially salient aspect” of noncorporeal embodiment, for example using the Butlerian questioning of “raw material” and “construct” I touched on in Chapter 1 (page 13).

Another area that arose precious little during my research but that begs for far more attention is the topic of race in Second Life, particularly in the area of embodiment. While I am responsible for not choosing to examine race as a specific topic of analysis, it is still notable that the only times it was brought up by participants was in the context of griefing. Even more significantly, race was mentioned in this way with respect to acts of unambiguous racism but also with respect to a perhaps more unsettling phenomenon, that of presumably white griefers taking on black embodiments for griefing activities that may or may not otherwise implicate race. Many have noted that Second Life is a white-dominated world, as far as human avatars are concerned (Boellstorff 2008:144; Lee and Park 2011:637; Welles 2007). Why this is the case would be a sizable area of discussion; related matters would include: the availability and quality of skins, shapes, and hair that would be “read” or recognized as black or otherwise of color, the difficulty of creating a Latino/a, South Asian, or light skinned black avatar that would not be perceived as a tanned or “exotic” white avatar, and the politics of using an avatar of a (human) race that
is not one’s own in real life.

These each point to issues of visibility, which can lead into an area in the study of virtual embodiment that I did not address in this dissertation. Race and visibility—as well as disability and visibility—may be constructed differently in virtual spaces, with species rather than color taking on more significance in many respects, but when residents try to assert a racialized human identity other than white, rather than contributing to human avatar diversity, the effort more often seems to get submerged within human avatar embodiment overall, which is implicitly and visibly white. Research could address these topics as well as whether nonhuman avatars are read as fundamentally “white,” in the absence of an “other” racial identifier, with regard to the underlying association between virtual and real life bodies. Clearly, there is a lot of room for many directions of analysis, and such research may prove fruitful for addressing the visibility and embodiment of race and disability in the actual world as well.

Many of the factors that influence these matters of visibility and embodiment apply to virtual identity and its performance in general. Although I touched somewhat on performativity in Chapter 2, I believe there is a lot more that can be said on the subject. I suggested in the introduction that the representation and performance of gender and other aspects of identity are shaped by environmental factors within coexisting virtual and actual contexts. Second Life is a social environment with a variety of overlapping sets of norms as well as overarching ones that apply more or less to the world on the whole. As individuals find their places in Second Life and learn who they are noncorporeally but at the same time embodied, they learn how gender and other aspects of identity are
expressed and experienced. They are, in effect learning how to perform their identity just as they are learning their identities themselves. Future research building on Butler and other theorists of performativity can examine the interaction between the actual and virtual contexts in the process of establishing a sense of and performance of identity via noncorporeal embodiment.

One of the earliest impetuses toward what this research eventually became was my interest in feminist theories of violence and how they would hold up when explored in a context in which embodiment could be representational but not corporeal, where bodies could be conduits for a range of experiences but not physical damage through victimization. Incorporating the additional discussions of identity, community, and sexuality were intended to contextualize this initial goal in order to make it clear how multiple levels of sociocultural involvement in the virtual world would contribute to experiencing violence as noncorporeally embodied. There were indications that individuals who were targets of griefing in Second Life would sometimes be motivated to learn and teach self-defense, in some cases women teaching specifically women. One major research question that can be explored in this area is whether these experiences of empowerment in the noncorporeal realm can contribute to a greater sense of empowerment and ability to defend oneself in the actual world. To what extent do women in the actual world hold back from learning self-defense because of how they are taught to use or not use their bodies, or because of a sense that their bodies are vulnerable or in need of someone else’s protection? How can an environment where self-defense is about learning to use tools, and where a presumably “weaker” body is not a factor in

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physical ability, contribute to women’s awareness of what they are capable of in the real
world? Gender can be reconceptualized in a way that understands the body
noncorporeally. Research in virtual worlds can use this reconceptualization to explore
how one’s sense of embodiment shapes perceptions of social and physical capacities in
both worlds.

Final Words

I would like to revisit a few of the goals I laid out for myself at the beginning of
the research, each of which I believe I found some support for through exploring the
concept of noncorporeal embodiment but all of which are worthy of further examination.
I suggested early in this dissertation that understanding embodiment noncorporeally
could contribute to new perspectives on common themes on feminist theory about what it
means to have a corporeally gendered body as well. One of the reasons I felt and still feel
that this was an important area of research was that virtual worlds provide a space in
which the role of the physical body is more readily complicated than is usually taken for
granted. As a consequence, gender theory developed in a virtual context could be
illuminating for research in the actual world as well. Finally, I proposed that experiences
of embodiment in virtual worlds would differ from experiences of embodiment in the
actual world in ways that could inform feminist theory by calling attention to the
understandings, beliefs, and assumptions underlying theories of gender, embodiment,
identity, sexuality, and violence that would make those differences more visible. I hope
that the research I have presented here can provide a beginning point for working toward
additional discoveries in each of these areas.

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References


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Appendix A: IRB Materials

Blog Participation Disclaimer
Thank you for visiting my blog. This blog is set up as part of a study relating to perceptions of gender and sexuality in the virtual world of Second Life. Information from discussions held here will be collected for use as qualitative (non-experimental) data for a dissertation project based at the Department of Women’s Studies at the Ohio State University in the United States. If you are interested in the project and in participating in this blog, please click on and read each of the following pages: Recruitment Request and Consent to Participate Document. Your participation on this blog will stand as your confirmation that you read and understand both of these pages.

If you have any additional questions or would like to participate in this research on a more substantial level such as by participating in an interview, please contact me in-world by dropping a notecard to Burgundy Mirajkar (Lea Popielinski in real life) or by emailing me at burgundymirage@gmail.com.

Recruitment Request for Blog Participation
My name in-world is Burgundy Mirajkar (Lea Popielinski in real life), and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Women’s Studies at the Ohio State University in Columbus,
Ohio, USA. I am currently seeking participants for a study on various aspects of gender and sexual identity in Second Life for my doctoral dissertation, which bears the working title of “Non-Corporeal Embodiment and Gendered Virtual Identity.”

This project looks at how people experience their relationships with their avatars as bodily representations of themselves that can appear however they design them to appear. I am looking for people who will be able to discuss any or all of the following topics: how your real life sex and the gender of your avatar affect your involvement in communities and social groups; your perceptions of sexuality in SL; your experience with griefing; and your involvement in the SL economy, as a business owner, content creator, or employee of an SL business.

This study will contribute to an understanding of how people view and experience gender and sexual identity in SL and how these relate to the experience of gender and identity in some aspects of real life. For instance, I hope to explore whether assumptions about relations between men and women (both socially and sexually) that are based on perceptions of bodily difference hold up in a world where differences in physical size do not imply differences in physical strength.

This research will follow ethical guidelines that will maintain the confidentiality of you and your avatar; I will not ask you to disclose your real life identity at all. If you would like to protect the identity of your avatar even further, you may wish to use an alt account throughout your time of participation. These and other guidelines for ethical research in my project have been approved by the Institutional Review Board of The Ohio State
University, and information is provided at the bottom of this page on how to contact them or my academic advisor, Dr. Cathy A. Rakowski, if you have any questions.

I Need Your Help
As a graduate student interested in how people view and construct gender and sexuality in Second Life and how it affects their experience of specific parts of their SL involvement, I would like to learn about your experiences as an SL resident and your observations on and perceptions of the experiences of others you have observed or with whom you have interacted in SL. Specifically, through the format of blogging, I hope you will engage in discussion with others willing to share experiences and ideas on a variety of topics such as the fact that avatars are assigned a gender (male and female, even though a resident may choose to make the avatar appear gender-neutral), griefing and strategies to control or eliminate it, reasons for setting up or joining “closed” communities in SL, freedom of expression (verbal, behavioral, self creation, etc) permitted through participation in SL, among others.

Research Process
The rights of all bloggers will be respected. You will have control over if and when to participate and you may withdraw from the study at any time. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have at any stage.

Use of information you provide me
My analysis and conclusions will be shared with Dr. Rakowski and my dissertation committee, and the results will be presented in my Ph.D. dissertation. The information I collect for this study might also be used in related works for other audiences, such as
scholarly journal articles or papers to be presented at conferences. The information you provide will only be used for the above stated purposes of the research.

If you would like to participate in the blog and the study, your participation on this blog stands as confirmation that you have read this page and the Consent Document, that you are at least 18 years of age, and that you are giving your informed consent to participate in this research.

I am looking forward to hearing from you soon and will greatly appreciate your assistance!

Yours sincerely,

Burgundy Mirajkar (in SL)

Address in RL:

Lea Popielinski, Department of Women’s Studies, The Ohio State University, 286 University Hall, 230 North Oval Mall, Columbus, OH 43210

Contact Information

If you have questions and concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can also contact the following persons for information.

Dr. Cathy A. Rakowski (dissertation advisor), Department of Women’s Studies, The Ohio State University, 309 Agricultural Administration Bldg., 2120 Fyffe Rd., Columbus, OH 43210
Recruitment Request for Interview Participation

My name in-world is Burgundy Mirajkar (Lea Popielinski in real life), and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Women’s Studies at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, USA. I am currently seeking participants for a study on various aspects of gender and sexual identity in Second Life for my doctoral dissertation, which bears the working title of “Non-Corporeal Embodiment and the Gendered Virtual Identity.”

This project looks at how people experience their relationships with their avatars as bodily representations of themselves that can appear however they design them to appear. I am looking for people who will be able to discuss any or all of the following topics: how your real life sex and the gender of your avatar affect your involvement in communities and social groups; your perceptions of sexuality in SL; your experience with griefing; and your involvement in the SL economy, as a business owner, content creator, or employee of an SL business.
This study will contribute to an understanding of how people view and experience gender and sexual identity in SL and how these relate to the experience of gender and identity in some aspects of real life. For instance, I hope to explore if assumptions about relations between men and women (both socially and sexually) that are based on perceptions of bodily difference hold up in a world where differences in physical size do not imply differences in physical strength.

This research will follow ethical guidelines that will maintain the confidentiality of you and your avatar; I will not ask you to disclose your real life identity at all. If you would like to protect the identity of your avatar even further, you may wish to use an alt account throughout your time of participation. These and other guidelines for ethical research in my project have been approved by the Institutional Review Board of The Ohio State University, and you will be given information on how to contact them or my academic advisor, Dr. Cathy A. Rakowski, if you have any questions.

I Need Your Help

As a graduate student interested in how people view and construct gender and sexuality in Second Life and how it affects their experience of specific parts of their SL involvement, I would like to learn about you and your experiences as a SL resident. I will ask you some general questions regarding your background, such as age, country of residence, and real life sex, but nothing that can be used to identify you in a real life context. Then I will ask about your experiences in one or more areas of SL. Learning
about a diverse range of backgrounds is critical to my understanding of how a wide variety of SL residents experience living in a virtual world and how different people develop different perceptions of what it means to interact with/as an avatar.

Research Process

Your comfort level throughout the interview process is very important to me. You will always have the right to decline to answer any questions you prefer not to answer, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have at any stage.

1. I will share with you the general question topics we might address, though specific questions will vary as the interview progresses.
2. Interviews will take place in text, via Instant Message between our avatars, at a location and time of your choosing.
3. Interviews will be logged. Your participation in the project will be interpreted as consent that the IM log will be kept. However, Linden Lab’s Terms of Service apply to our interviews, and I will only quote text from the logs directly if I have your consent to do so.
4. If I have questions about anything we discuss, I will contact you for clarification.
5. During interviews, you may ask me questions at any time, and I will do my best to answer them. I am also to open any suggestions you may have and will make any changes you request as to the continuation of our conversation.
6. You are free to log our IM as well.
7. Interviews will take place in sessions that will not exceed two hours.

8. I will not ask for your real life name, and I will change your avatar name in all written documentation besides the IM log unless you indicate otherwise. In addition, if you would like even greater confidentiality for your primary avatar, you may use (or create) an alt account for the purpose of the interviews.

Use of information you provide me

I will be integrating our conversations with my interviews with others, along with data collected by other means. My analysis and conclusions will be shared with Dr. Rakowski and my dissertation committee, and the results will be presented in my Ph.D. dissertation. The information I collect for this study might also be used in related works for other audiences, such as scholarly journal articles or papers to be presented at conferences. The information you provide will only be used for the above stated purposes of the research.

If you would like to participate in this study, please drop a notecard to me (Burgundy Mirajkar) in-world from the avatar you wish to use during the interviews. In the notecard, please include your avatar name, the days and times when it is best for me to contact you in-world for an appointment. Please go to the following link Consent where you will find The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research. Please feel free to ask me any questions prior to or after confirming your consent. I will IM you at one of the times you specify, and we can decide on a time and location for our first meeting.
I am looking forward to hearing from you soon and will greatly appreciate your assistance!

Yours Sincerely,

Burgundy Mirajkar (in SL)

Address in RL:
Lea Popielinski
Department of Women’s Studies
The Ohio State University
286 University Hall
230 North Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43210

Contact Information
If you have questions and concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can also contact the following persons for information.

Dr. Cathy A. Rakowski, dissertation advisor
Department of Women’s Studies
The Ohio State University
309 Agricultural Administration Bldg.
Ms. Sandra Meadows, research specialist
The Office of Responsible Research Practices
The Ohio State University
300 Research Foundation
1960 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210
Phone: (800) 678-6251
Email: meadows.8@osu.edu

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research (Blog)

Study Title: Non-Corporeal Embodiment and Gendered Virtual Identity

Researcher: Lea M. Popielinski

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about the study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your
decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, your participation on
the blog will stand that you have read this page and the Recruitment Request page, that
you are at least 18 years of age, and that you are giving your informed consent to
participate.

Purpose:
The purpose of the study is to examine how Second Life residents understand,
experience, and express gender and sexual identity in several key areas of SL social
interaction.

I am seeking Second Life residents, current and past, to participate in a weblog where
participants may engage in discussion regarding different aspects of the following:
involvements in communities in SL, especially but not limited to single-sex communities;
perceptions of sexuality as part of SL’s social context; selection of avatar characteristics,
including gender; experiences with griefing, whether as targets, witnesses, or self-defense
instructors; and SL business ownership and content creation, among others suggested by
blog participants.

Duration:
You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study,
there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are
otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect any current or future relationship with
The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:
Your participation will remain confidential if you choose, and I will not be asking you for any personal information or information you are not permitted to share. Risk of either psychological stress or information disclosure will thus be minimal.

Benefits to you as a participant include contributing to a study that will help improve our understanding of how gender and sexuality affect everyday social interactions in both SL and RL, as well as possibly contributing ideas to your own research (if any). A structured opportunity to share and discuss with others about your experiences and perceptions is another benefit.

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

• Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;

• The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which
you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision
will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time
without penalty or loss of benefits. By consenting to participation, you do not give up any
personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State
University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to
applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the
rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study or if you feel that you have been
harmed by the study, you may contact Lea Popielinski at popielinski.1@osu.edu or
through Instant Message to Burgundy Mirajkar in-world or contact Dr. Cathy A.
Rakowski in the Department of Women’s Studies at (614) 292-6447 or
rakowski.1@osu.edu.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-
related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you
may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-
800-678-6251.
The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research (Interviews)

Study Title: Non-Corporeal Embodiment and Gendered Virtual Identity

Researcher: Lea M. Popielinski

Sponsor:

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked in Instant Message to confirm your consent. I will be logging the Instant Message, and you are welcome to do so, as well.

Purpose:

The purpose of the study is to examine how Second Life residents understand, experience, and express gender and sexual identity in several key areas of SL social interaction.

Procedures/Tasks:

I am seeking SL residents to participate in interviews focusing on one or more of the following topics: involvement in communities in SL, especially but not limited to single-
sex communities; perceptions of sexuality as part of SL’s social context; experiences with
griefing, whether as targets, witnesses, or self-defense instructors; and SL business
ownership and content creation. Participants in each of these subject areas will be asked
to focus on gender as a factor in the topic or topics. Interviews will be done in segments
of no more than two hours.

Duration:

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study,
there will be no penalty to you. Your decision will not affect your future relationship
with The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:

Risks are minimal. You will be able to control your level of confidentiality. I will not ask
for any real life identifying information, your avatar name will be changed in all written
documentation except for chat logs, and you have the option of using an alt account if
you would like to protect your primary avatar’s identity even further.

Some of the interview topics might touch on sensitive issues, but you are free to decline
to answer any questions that you wish, and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits to you as a participant include the opportunity to talk about what I hope will be
an interesting topic for you and, of course, to have your experiences included in a study
that will help improve an understanding of how gender and sexuality affect everyday
social interactions in both SL and RL.

Confidentiality:
Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

* Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
* The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
* The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

Please note, however, that I will not be asking for your real life identity, so unless you volunteer identifying information to me yourself, any release of information will be attached only to the name of the avatar you use during our interviews.

Participant Rights:
You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which
you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By confirming your consent, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Dr. Cathy A. Rakowski in the Department of Women’s Studies at (614) 292-6447.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

If you confirm consent, please acknowledge so with the avatar named Burgundy Mirajkar.
Appendix B: Participants and Web Sources

Interview Participants:

Ainsley – Two two-hour interviews (main focuses: avatar construction and griefing)

Bala – One two-hour interview (main focuses: avatar construction, gender identity, and sexuality)

Caelan – One two-hour interview, one three-hour interview (main focuses: avatar construction, gender identity, sexuality, griefing)

Derya – Two two-hour interviews (main focuses: community, sexuality)

Eko – One two-hour interview (main focus: sexuality)

Flannery – One two-hour interview (main focuses: avatar construction, longitudinal familiarity with Second Life)

Greer – One two-hour interview (main focuses: gender identity, avatar construction, griefing)

Hunter – One two-hour interview (main focus: griefing, new user experience)

Io – One two-hour interview (main focus: griefing)

Blog Participants (with number of contributions):

Zan (1)
Yuki (3)
Xun (2)
Wynne (3)
Vieno (1)
Unathi (2)
Temple (5)
Sparrow (5)
Ricki (4)
Quinn (2)
Puck (4)
Odalis (2)
Nima (1)
Maayan (1)
Logan (1)
Kaede (1)
Jackie (1)
Inge (1)
Haven (1)
Gabby (2)
Farai (1)
Evren (1)
Deniz (1)
Cassidy (1)
Braidy (3)
Arden (1)
Zohar (1)
Yanick (1)
Xiang (1)
Whitney (3)
Vivian (1)
Udo (1)

Additional References:

Films and Videos

- *DIVAS*, “Phaylen Seeks a World of Warcraft Guild”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkZetBxaP2w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkZetBxaP2w)
- *Tonight Live with Paisley Beebe*, guest Stephanie Steamweaver: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy94ef9UYq4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy94ef9UYq4)
Linden Lab JIRA (Issue Tracker)
• Bring Back Last Name Options!: https://jira.secondlife.com/browse/SVC-7125
• Use the Age Verification system already in place to do a voluntary Gender Verification to protect against the fraudulent use of female avatars by RL males: https://jira.secondlife.com/browse/SVC-4180
Second Life Community Forums
• Age Verification Problems: http://secondlife.lithium.com/t5/Account/Age-Verification-Problems/qaq-p/835183/comment-id/2939
• I’m having age verification problems: http://community.secondlife.com/t5/Account/I-m-having-age-verification-problems/qaq-p/933237
• Is it just the men that grief?: http://forums-archive.secondlife.com/327/34/139653/1.html
• Maturity Ratings: http://community.secondlife.com/t5/English-Knowledge-Base/Maturity-ratings/ta-p/700119
Second Life Corporate
• Terms of Service: http://secondlife.com/corporate/tos.php
Second Life Wiki/Knowledge Base
• Adult Content, History: http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/History/Adult_content
• Griefer: http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Griefer
• Griefing: http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Griefing
• Inworld: http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Inworld
• Resident: http://wiki.secondlife.com/wiki/Resident
User-Created Resources
- Flickr stream, Ansariel Hiller, “Ugly Freenises” set: [http://www.flickr.com/photos/40795370@N02/sets/72157625979765253/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/40795370@N02/sets/72157625979765253/)
- Flickr stream, Ansariel Hiller, “Noobies” set: [http://www.flickr.com/photos/40795370@N02/sets/72157621831037678/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/40795370@N02/sets/72157621831037678/)
- Free*Style: [http://slfreestyle.blogspot.com/](http://slfreestyle.blogspot.com/)
- Zindra Community Center: [http://zindracommunity.com/](http://zindracommunity.com/)

Wikipedia/Wiktionary

Other
- Aristotle/Integrity: [http://integrity.aristotle.com/](http://integrity.aristotle.com/)
- Power and Control Wheel: [http://www.uic.edu/depts/owa/power_control-wheel_clip_image001.jpg](http://www.uic.edu/depts/owa/power_control-wheel_clip_image001.jpg)
- Yiff Toys: [http://yiffytoys.de/index.en.html](http://yiffytoys.de/index.en.html)