

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

A project by Marc Owens & Tony Mullin

FOREWORD

by Marc Owens & Tony Mullin

“The fantasy of being transported into another world, to be taken wholly into an imaginary realm, is a primal desire.”

Randall Packer

“The virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual.”

Deleuze

We do not need a computer to experience virtual reality. We might read a novel and imagine the space it depicts, fantasize as to how we would react in this context or imagine ourselves as the protagonist, thinking, moving and reacting as they might. This is a form of virtual reality. As Elizabeth Groz observes, “The virtual reality of computer space is fundamentally no different from the virtual reality of writing, reading, drawing, or even thinking: the virtual is the space of emergence of the new, the unthought, and the unrealized.”

Second life is a three-dimensional virtual world that allows the user to create a virtual identity – known as an Avatar – and participate in a fully interactive community with its own economy, cultures and political system. The population currently stands at 8 million residents with an economy currently valued at \$50 million dollars a year. The Linden Dollar – Second Life’s currency – is recognized on the global stock exchange.

This type of gaming experience is known as a ‘Massively Multiplayer On-line Game’ (MMOs). Second Life certainly has all of the visual characteristics of a Role Playing Game (RPG): the third person view of your avatar, the Heads Up Display, the immersive world to explore. At a glance Second Life appears to be a RPG like countless others but within this particular virtual world you go where you like and do as you please, your avatar is

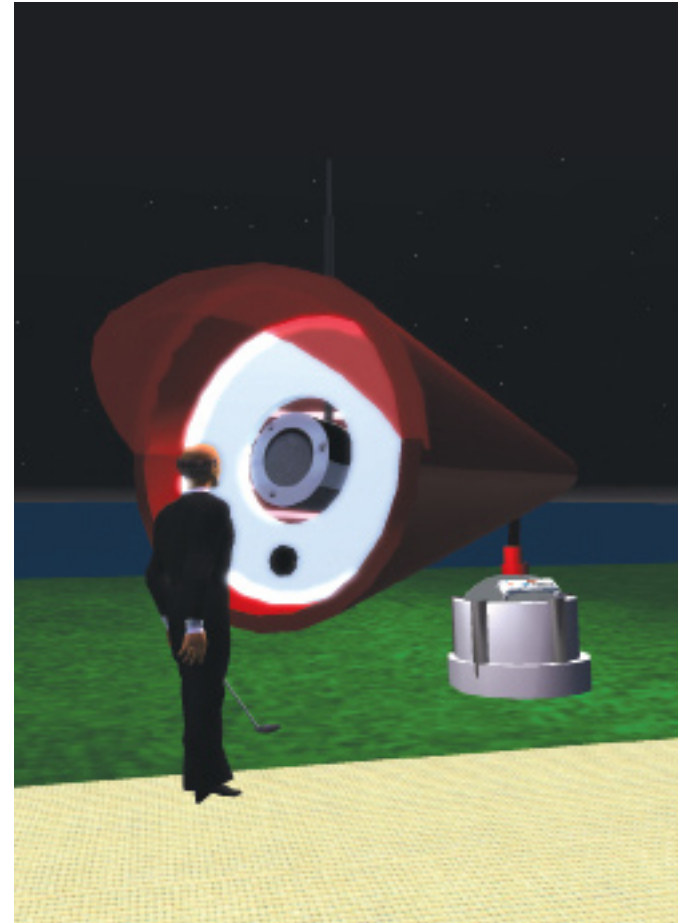
your means for exploring this metaverse. In fact Philip Rosedale claims to have built a new country rather than a new game.

Second Life residents have no limitations on characters they can be or how many they can have. Sparked by this fact, we wanted to explore what the effects were of creating a virtual character. Certain questions arose: Is an avatar a mask in which to explore alternative identities or given the lack of real world social constraints, might it be suggested that our virtual character is a more truthful representation of our psychological selves?

The virtual communities created by online games have provided us with a new medium for social interaction and communication. They offer us a playground in which to create new realities and reinvent our personalities beyond the confines of the physical body. Residents can experience a full spectrum of emotions — love from a relationship, loss from a break-up, jealousy over status, anger over territory. This level of emotional investment adds another layer of reality to the environment.

With this in mind, we wondered whether people maintained their real world ethics and morals. Moreover, we questioned if such boundaries have relevance in virtual spaces where critically events do not actually take place.

In response to this we created a confession box within Second Life. The intension was to design a catalyst for discussion, something that might create social friction, raising questions over the measure of ethics in a virtual world. The device invited residents to anonymously leave confessional statements. What follows is a selection of the responses.



Second Life Confession Box



What do I get for telling you my
life in RL or SL?

My RL landlord makes me pay rent in Lindens. I'm not really interested in SL, but it's how I pay the rent. Cheap bastard can't just buy \$20 in Lindens. But it's free rent, what do I care?

I try to satisfy all my fantasies in SL...even the most hidden ones...that maybe I wont ever satisfy them in RL. I'm dirty and perverted in SL...it's so different to my sexual life in RL.

I've nothing to hide. Except...when I come on SL I come on to just mess with people's heads. And the funny thing is they think I'm serious, but I'm really only here to get reactions.

For a moment today...I couldn't remember if the two hot cross buns I ate yesterday were virtual or real.

When I turn this game off I am back to the old RL me again.

I work for the government. In here I'm an escort.

I tried to get a normal job here.
First I wanted to be a doctor, engineer,
etc. But there is no job like that.
Now I try to earn money the easy way.

I regularly find myself looking for
a top in my wardrobe only to finally
remember that I only have it in my
SL inventory.

I'm a virtual pimp. I arrange guys to have sex with, negotiate the price, take the money.

I don't feel guilty. There's no difference here between SL and RL.

I communicate better with my sister in SL because we are not as unidimensional as in RL. We meet here because she lives on the other side of the country.

Well...I've had relationships on here that remains a secret from RL, no one ever knew about them. There is a girl in the US...we have spent a lot of time together here...and I don't want my family to find out because I should be spending time with them instead of being in SL. I'm married.

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

I have looked up to my right to see how much money I have while out shopping.

CONFESSIONS

I had sex. I had a BF in RL, and I just wasn't satisfied...physically.

Early on I noticed a lack of minorities on SL so I created a black girl. Then I visited certain sex sites with my primary avi for 30 days...and did the same with the black girl...to see how much longer it takes to get offers...It takes twice as long for the black girl to get offers. Now, either there are almost no black people in SL or else blacks have a white avi.

I have to tell you something :) It's related to my RL too. 2 days ago my boyfriend saw me while I was having sex in SL. He got so jealous and broke up with me for that reason. He told me that if I'm doing it in here it means I want to do it in RL too. It sounds silly I know. I couldn't believe it :) He's the silly one I think. I only did it to make money in SL...it has no difference than watching porn :)

I sometimes dream in living SL colors... Some of my furniture designs came from dreams. I'm always calculating primage in furniture. My RL sofa has 43 prims.

In the heat of passion I made a promise and later broke my word. I will be more careful about the promises I make in the future. The person never knew I broke my word but I did. I regret that I led some people on and I disappointed them I think. Several guys I knew wanted to meet me in RL. After torrid SL romances they were hurt when I did not want to pursue it that far. They had a hard time keeping RL and SL separate.

I don't have anything to hide. My family watches me play in here and they know everything. My husband knows all of my friends and some call my real phone.

I met a guy in a club, he seemed nice so I agreed to go on a date with him. We went out a couple of times but I had decided I didn't want to see him anymore. After I told him he became really obsessive and started following me everywhere and waiting for me outside work.

When I am shopping, I'll pick something out then wonder what folder I should put it in.

The worst thing I've done here? Offer my sexual chat for money! I'd never do that in RL. In RL I'm in school and waitress.

I bathe in blood and then drink it up.

I'm a business analyst in RL. My avi here has very much the same outlook on life as the person behind it.

I am not gay, infact I fancy women so much that I want to be one.

I'm scared of what I am capable of doing in SL, and how far I am willing to go. Lately I have been taking things too far.

O kay...once I used a different Avatar, a succubus if you are familiar with that term, kind of a demonic seductress. When I was in that form, I had all kinds of attachments like horns, a tail, even hooves! Of course I was easily noticeable in crowds and easily enough, I picked up a girl who was quite fascinated by I and at the same time horny. So I decided to take her back with me somewhere private and secluded with a nice dark and gothic ambience. The roleplaying began...the girl was so intense and forward, I ended up attaching a 'male part'. Then the girl continued flirting as she was so turned on by the newest edition to my avatar.



VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

The following two interviews were anonymously conducted in Second Life.

How many Avatars do you have and why?

One avatar wastes enough of my time...well, I have one avatar with two personas. One for the San Miguel kingdom and the one I normally walk around in.

How would you compare their personas?

As the medieval character, I put on the persona of an Olde English Lord. But, my personality remains the same. As the street character (myself) I am very much the same as who I am in RL. The only difference I'd say is that I have no fear of someone shooting me, or punching me out because I countered his insult with a better one. Also, as a note of interest, my SIM fiance likes my avi to look bigger. She knows this is how I really look.

Do you have a favourite? If so why?

N/A. But, my original would be my favorite. Less work to be myself.

Is there anything you don't like about your avatars?

Facial details that prevent it from looking like me. But, SL has the best appearance editor I've seen on any SIM. Close enough.

If they ever met do you think they would like each other?

Very much so. It's modelled from photographs.

ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWS

Interview 1



First interviewee's avatar

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

How many hours a week do you spend as an avatar/s?

Perhaps 40 or more. But, I'm new to SL. The addiction should wear off soon.

How do you feel BBSs or MUDs compare to SL?

Same people, different format.

Does an image-based interface add depth or take away from the fantasy?

Adds to the fantasy.

Do you adopt the imagined personality of the avatar or does your personality remain the same?

I have two roles I play in SL. One is just me, which is the same personality. The other is a medieval scribe. Aside from the change to olde english speech patterns, it is also just me.

Can you give an example of a social behaviour you reserve only for SL?

Sexual perversions. But, that would not be considered social, would it? There's not much you cannot find on SL. You can always find a woman, or someone acting like a woman, to do just about anything in SL you want. However, that takes time. As a woman myself, I could initiate such fantasies.

Do you have a specific example?

Alright. Bestiality, let's say. That's more common in SL than many would think. But if I wanted to get a woman involved with bestiality, I could make a female avi and have her do whatever I wanted to watch. It goes a

ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWS

Interview 1

step further than that, however. I should perhaps first elaborate on how it goes further than common bestiality. Here in SL, a person can buy an appearance, called a skin, that looks like a human-beast hybrid, or one that looks like an actual beast. So, the person can actually become a beast to participate in the fantasy. They also sell genitalia for different beasts, which anyone can wear like a strap-on dildo, of sorts. Male genitalia cannot be worn with clothes.

Consider the following: The virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. Therefore, all virtual activity is permissible because it hasn't actually happened. What is your opinion?

Yes. Aside from verbal abuse, monetary or identity theft, or manipulating someone into an activity in real life they would not otherwise have done – such as suicide or criminal behavior. The bestiality for example, it's not actually taking place. It's like a movie, or a cartoon. "No real persons or beasts were harmed in the making of this fantasy."

Imagine, though a simulation, an experience whereby the RL aesthetics were perfectly replicated; smell, sound, taste etc. Would it be the same as actually doing it? Or does the fact that it is still virtual, make it ok?

I'm not certain, since I've never actually engaged in bestiality. However, there is a distance from RL that I find pleasing. Such as you mentioned, it doesn't stink or get messy. Others would enjoy those aspects.

It is a sanitised interaction of sorts, you might say?

Yes. In a fantasy, you can make the conditions perfect without the annoying fact of reality making it messy.

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

To what extent have you become emotionally invested in SL?

I've been involved with computer societies since they began with network systems. I'm not emotionally connected. However, many people are.

Did you mention that you were engaged? Is that in RL or SL?

I have an SL fiancée, yes. We will be getting 'married' here in the kingdom in June. It is not at all real. She has her own husband and children somewhere very distant from me.

So is it all just fun or do you have an emotional investment in her?

Yes and no. We enjoy each other's company in SL, talking, sharing fantasies, shopping, role playing, etc. Within the SL environment, there is an emotional attachment. However, we are both about 50 with our own real lives and know this will never be real. It is just an online game. While we enjoy and respect each other as individuals, no real life attachment can ever be made. There are many who cannot make this distinction, however.

Surely though if she left the game or distanced her avatar from you, you would be hurt and mourn that loss in a RL way?

Yes, indeed. I would equate that to losing contact with an old college friend with whom you stay in contact by letter and phone. While I have affection for her as a person, my life would not be crushed. Again, there are many who cannot maintain that distance.

ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWS

Interview 1

What is your opinion of the following statement: Given that, in the real world we must deal with physical, social and economic constraints and SL effectively gives us the ability to be or do what we want, SL is a much more truthful representation of ourselves.

Perhaps, but not necessarily so. It is said that a person does not change as they get older. They only become more themselves. Perhaps that relates to your statement. It seems that anonymity allows one to abandon the standard social etiquette. You have, perhaps, found that with those who have been here for a long time and attempt to insult newbies, 'noobs,' persons new to SL.

After a person has as many years experience as I, you readopt the social etiquette. Being kind and gracious to persons. Not casting insults because no one knows who you really are and have no fear of reprisal. An online persona is like a mask. After a time, however, one realizes that no mask can cover an ugly personality.

What do you personally find is the major advantage of using Second Life as a tool for social interaction?

I live alone and work from home. Never go out, anymore. I enjoy my solitude. But, it's good to have a break in the monotony and social interaction is entertaining.

May I ask what your RL family and marital situation is?

I am divorced, and quite happy about ending that worst mistake of my life. No children and I live alone. As an artist, I have spent the great majority of my life alone and find it very comfortable.

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWS

Interview 2



Second interviewee's avatar

How many Avatars do you have?

Hmmm well that's not a clear cut answer...there is the ones I use and the ones I own. I probably own at least 14 but I use probably only three regularly. A lot of people would probably be quite similar on that level...they own lots but use few. The players that have played longer obviously own more.

Do you have a favourite? If so why?

I have a favorite depending solely on the environment. Some places are more tailored to specific kinds of avatars, i.e. if you go to a goth area normally your avatar is goth etc. I use this one because I like Siberian huskies and that's really my only real reason. It also does not play into race or age really which is a plus. My preference is this because if I played a human avi then I would be choosing preferences based on colour as well as many other things. This is more anonymous I guess.

Do you feel that anonymity is an important part of your SL experience?

Of course it is, it is probably one of the most important aspects to most people on here. I don't really care one way or another however a lot of people use SL to explore various things they would not in RL, sexually as well as other things. Most people do not put that they "like to dress in latex and be beaten by whips" on their Facebook account...so I would say it is important :)

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

Do you adopt the imagined personality of the avatar or does your personality remain the same?

A lot of people keep the same personality no matter what. However I will often change my personality based on the environment and people I am around. It comes into role playing and how you want to be seen.

In what ways do you feel your SL personality is different to your RL one?

Well I am definitely more aloof in this one, more forward. You will find people who are very introverted in real life are not as much here, because they feel safe through their anonymity. I guess my personality in SL can be far more sexual from time to time, depending where you are and the circumstances. For instance...right now you are in a place specifically catering to sexual entertainment.

What type of sexual entertainment?

Anything you can imagine you can find it. You have every subculture you can imagine here and if you know where to go you can find it. Name it...it's out there, submission, BDSM, slave/master, gay, furry, shemale, vore, vampire, ageplay, capture role play. In this world it has created a way to find another with the most abstract interests rather easy. I have a friend and she likes BDSM and she is from Sweden, geographic boundaries crumble in this setting.

Do you reserve this type of behaviour for SL or is this something you practice in your RL?

The only real limiting factor is language and I can see that eventually disappearing as automatic language

ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWS

Interview 2

translators get integrated in the next 5-10 years. As for your question...I believe for the most part it is far too abstract to integrate into real life. I am a Siberian husky on here...but certainly not in real life. I think it tends to be personality preference and perhaps people building what they view as their perfect self.

What about some of the sexual practices you mention? Does SL provide a vehicle for your fantasies that RL can't provide?

Hmmmm well I am sure that would be true for most people. I think personally I can go outside my comfort zone in here without getting scared. For example would you go into someone's basement or to a BDSM club to experiment in real life? Probably not. However most people will look into the most abstract sexual things on here...because if they do not like it...they just log out.

So a great deal of the draw of SL is the preservation of safety?

Well this is probably an extremely good environment to research. Most MMORPGs are static without designers, this is not. This world is what the users decided it to be. It tended to lean towards being sexual or just a chatting type experience. I think the sexual portion is very easy to comprehend in today's society. I think the biggest draws are anonymity, creative freedom, safety and escapism. I rather like SL because you do not have artificial boundaries, i.e. when you play most MMORPGS, you are separated by continent or group. However that is not the case here :)

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

What is your opinion of the following statement: Given that, in the real world we must deal with physical, social and economic constraints and SL effectively gives us the ability to be or do what we want, SL is a much more truthful representation of ourselves.

Hmmm I am not sure that is true...perhaps in the long run if you had someone playing for a long time but in the short run probably not. Usually when people start they will be all over the map and experiment with the general freedom. I do not really think that is more true to themselves but rather just plays on their curiosity. I think people are generally much more extroverted, curious, forward. I would compare it to letting a starving child into a candy store and then basing the research of his interest in candy in what he eats. However he is much more likely to grab whatever is near and available. I think SL is somewhat similar, people are in a new world and so they experiment with whatever is readily accessible.

How many hours a week do you spend in SL?

Depends...hmmm probably a lot less than the average person watches...hmmm let's see, maybe 10-15 hours a week, sometimes more sometimes less. Some people are a lot more and some are a lot less. People who use this as escapism will be here a lot more.

Would you not consider your own participation as escapism?

Absolutely but then again anything that people do that provides a sense of entertainment, happiness and break from one's daily life is escapism. To that end anything you enjoy could be considered escapism to one degree or another. So the short answer is absolutely.

ANONYMOUS INTERVIEWS

Interview 2

Consider the following: The virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. Therefore, all virtual activity is permissible because it hasn't actually happened. What is your opinion?

Haha well there have been numerous court cases that would closely align with that quote. We are going to play into my opinion. I think it is and should be much more permissible than in the real life. Because when you get into policing what people should do in a virtual world it becomes a bit scary. Should someone go to jail for 'touching a child' in a virtual world...probably not if it is between two consenting adults. I prefer this to what they might be doing in the real world.

This is a lot of people's out no matter how much I may disagree with what their 'out' is. I like to compare it to violence in video games research, they say 10 million people bought GTA4 but have death rates or violence gone up and is it directly linked...no...the research is not there. I think it should be permissible in a virtual world between consenting adults but punished harshly in the real world...

May I ask what your RL family and marital situation is?

Long term student/writer, white, male, single, 25, Canada. Although you would need to get comparisons on that with others, I am actually probably a bit below the average age on here. Many are married on here...and a lot of them are here in this sexual parlour.

VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

Do you feel that you have become emotionally invested in SL to any extent?

Hmmm sure...to a degree, I enjoy having friends from all over the world. Some I know personally but many I do not. I would be more than happy to visit or have some friends I know from here visit as friends. So I guess you could say I am vested to a extent. There are people I have known on here for quite some time. I have met people from here before while travelling and that is probably not that abnormal.

You mentioned that you have multiple avatars and a few that you regularly use. If they were to meet, would they like each other?

In real life though, I am extroverted, very fit and extremely outgoing. I like the kind of different environment this has to offer. Hmmm haha if my avatars met each other they would probably stare in confusion :) Yeah they would probably all get along.



VIRTUAL CONFESSIONS

Avatar/Avi	Computer designed representation of yourself in SL
BBS	Bulletin Board System
Escort	An avatar who engages in sexual activity or gives companionship for things of value, usually Linden Dollars
Furry	Avatars that look like animals or creatures
Griefing	Activities and behaviours designed to make another avatar's Second Life experience unpleasant
Heads Up Display (HUD)	An attachment that is viewed only by the avatar who owns it; most common are animation overrides and MystiTools
Lag	Delays in-world caused by slow internet connections or too many avatars/objects/scripts running all at once in the same place
Linden Dollar/L\$	Second Life currency
Machinima	Movies made in Second Life (pronounced muh-sheen-eh-ma)
MMORPG	Massively Multi-user Online Role Playing Game
Multi User Dungeon	A multi-player computer game combining elements of role playing games, hack and slash style computer games and social chat rooms

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Newbie/Noob	Term used by experienced residents to describe a new player
Parcel	An area of land owned by a single user or group in Second Life
Prim (Primitive)	A single cube or other shape. Linked together, they can create complex objects. Each object has a 'prim count' which is the total number of shapes the object is comprised of
Resident	Someone who has membership (an avatar) in Second Life
RL	Real life
SL	Second Life
SLURL	A direct teleport link to a location in Second Life
Second Life	A privately-owned, partly subscription-based 3D virtual world, made publicly available in 2003 by San Francisco-based Linden Lab. Founded by former RealNetworks Chief Technology Officer Philip Rosedale
Teleport	A form of transportation in Second Life
Texture	An image that covers prims to give them a look of authenticity
Vore	The fetish of being devoured, devouring something, or watching the act

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